

GENDER AND LGBTQI+ POLICY AND PROGRAMMING IN VANUATU:

Opportunities, challenges, capacity and tools for change

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CAITLIN MCCORMACK

3Keel

STEVE JENNINGS

3Keel

LINDA KENNI

Independent Consultant

ABSTRACT

In 2016, the government of Vanuatu introduced a National Gender Equality Policy. A second phase of the policy will be implemented in 2020-2024. Insights from key informants working on gender in Vanuatu reveal that there have been some positive developments during the first policy phase. A number of challenges remain, however, including limited capacity in a number of key institutions and resistance to progress caused by prevailing conservative and patriarchal values and beliefs in Vanuatu. In the absence of other legal instruments for LGBTQI+/SOGI equality, perspectives vary on whether this should be included in the revised policy.

CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Glossary	<u>45</u>
Executive Summary.....	<u>56</u>
1 Introduction	<u>67</u>
2 Methods.....	<u>78</u>
3 Background.....	<u>1213</u>
4 Findings: The First Phase of The National Gender Equality Policy.....	<u>2122</u>
5 SOGI and The National Gender Equality Policy.....	<u>3233</u>
6 Conclusions	<u>3839</u>
Bibliography	<u>Error! Bookmark not defined.41</u>
Notes.....	44
Acknowledgements.....	45

GLOSSARY

Acronym or word	Definition
CDCCC	Community Disaster and Climate Change Committees
CEDAW	Convention on The Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DSSPAC	Department of Strategic Policy Planning and Aid Coordination
DWA	Department of Women's Affairs
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GFP	Gender Focal Point
KI/KII	Key Informant/Key Informant Interview
LGBTQI+/LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Other Diverse Genders and Sexualities (used interchangeably with SOGI, below)
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MJCS	Ministry of Justice and Community Services
NGEP or 'the policy'	National Gender Equality Policy 2015-2019
NGEP 2	National Gender Equality Policy Phase 2 2020-2024
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSDP	Vanuatu National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2030
PPA	Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality
SEED	Oxfam Gender-Just Social and Economic Empowerment Design Tool
SOGI	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (used interchangeably with LGBTQI+, above)
UN	United Nations
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
VCC	Vanuatu Christian Council
VNCW	Vanuatu National Council for Women

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to persistent challenges of gender inequality in Vanuatu the government introduced a National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) in 2016. The policy lapsed this year and a second phase (NGEP 2) will be implemented for the period of 2020-2024.

The aim of this research is to investigate factors affecting the implementation of the first phase of the policy by exploring experiences, insights and perspectives amongst individuals working on gender within Vanuatu. The objective is to identify key factors contributing to successes or challenges with implementation to provide insights which could help inform and support the implementation of the NGEP 2, as well as gender work in Vanuatu more broadly. A specific focus within the research is to investigate perspectives on the inclusion of LGBTQI+ communities within the policy and related work. Findings are based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Vanuatu in February and March 2020.

Key themes which emerged from the research were the importance of institutional capacity and of awareness and attitudes around gender and LGBTQI+ topics amongst individuals in key institutions. Informants reported good alignment between the NGEP strategic areas and the content of programming and internal gender policies of many institutions working on gender in Vanuatu. Coordination of work, however, was seen to have been lacking during the first phase of the policy. Critically, informants saw the need for an implementation plan and a Monitoring & Evaluation framework. Both are apparently priorities in the development of the NGEP 2, including an intention to coordinate with Non-government Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to 'map' ongoing gender work to the NGEP strategic areas.

Dedicated time, resources and expertise for the implementation of gender work under the NGEP were also identified as challenges and are priorities for the NGEP 2. The Department of Women's Affairs for example, which is responsible for development of the policy, has historically received limited funding and lacks institutional support and authority for policy implementation.

The establishment of Gender Focal Points in some government ministries was seen as a positive step towards integrating gender in government processes and practice. Along with the development of internal gender policies, GFPs were seen to provide critical visibility and accountability for gender. However, progress requires broader buy-in and support for gender objectives, particularly amongst senior decision-makers, which is likely to require sensitisation in the form of awareness raising and efforts to shift attitudes and behaviours.

The absence of any mention of LGBTQI+ individuals – commonly referred to as SOGI in Vanuatu – in the NGEP was seen to be a gap which should be addressed in the second phase of the policy. However, although there are some indications of shifting attitudes, the subject of SOGI remains highly contentious in Vanuatu. Balancing the various viewpoints is a challenge and will require a sensitive approach. Nevertheless, inclusion of SOGI in a national policy would facilitate progress towards realising the human rights of these members of Vanuatu society.

The SEED tool developed by Oxfam offers a resource which could be used to support implementation of the NGEP 2 and related programming. The focus is on the SEED tool primarily because this research was commissioned by Oxfam which meant that Oxfam in Vanuatu could facilitate access to SEED sites, data and respondents. In this research, interviews and FGDs were conducted at three SEED pilot sites to evaluate outcomes of SEED in these communities. SEED was found to provide valuable insights into existing dynamics and perspectives around gender and SOGI within communities and showed some success in raising awareness and changing attitudes. It also showed value for capacity building around gender and SOGI amongst staff involved in programme delivery.

With the NGEP 2 for 2020-2024, there is considerable potential for real progress to be made towards gender equality in Vanuatu. Insights from the first phase of the policy provide valuable lessons which will hopefully be applied to maximise the effectiveness of the next phase.

1 INTRODUCTION

As for many countries, gender inequality is a persistent development challenge for Vanuatu. In 2016, the government introduced the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) to address this and “*promote equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities among men and women and to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls*”¹. The policy recently lapsed and a new phase of the policy – the NGEP 2 – will be implemented for the period of 2020-2024.

The successful implementation of a policy depends on a number of factors. A key one is the capacity that exists amongst the individuals and institutions whose work will be influenced by the policy, and on whom its successful implementation depends. This capacity includes expertise, time and personal commitment to, or support for, the policy aims amongst individuals working in key institutions including local and international NGOs with gender-relevant programming, and government ministries in which gender mainstreaming measures have been or are planned to be introduced. In order to evaluate factors affecting the implementation of the NGEP to date, and prospects for progress with the next phase, it is critical to capture the insights of people who have experience of working in related roles during the initial NGEP policy period.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aims of this research are to capture the experiences, attitudes and insights of individuals and institutions whose work will influence, and be influenced by, the NGEP and NGEP 2, as well as amongst communities that will be the target of policy implementation activities. The capacity and perceptions of such individuals have significant implications for the successful implementation of the policies and related programming, and for the possible inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI+) – or Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) – rights^{aa}.

Information about gender and SOGI dynamics at a community level in Vanuatu are illustrated through data collected in three sites where Oxfam has piloted the gender mainstreaming SEED tool (see [Box 1](#)~~Box 4~~). This provides insights into the context in which gender and LGBTQI+ policy and programming is implemented in Vanuatu, including some of the key challenges and opportunities. Learnings from using the SEED tool could help inform best practice for implementation of actions under the NGEP and provide a tool for working with communities to identify priority local challenges, and to sensitise about gender and SOGI.

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^a The acronym SOGI is commonly used in Vanuatu and so is adopted here. It is synonymous with LGBTQI+.

This report is intended to complement the review of the NGEP led by the Department of Women's Affairs towards the end of 2019 which focused on evaluating material impacts of the policy. By providing insights into what it is like to work with implementing the NGEP, it is hoped that this research may support the implementation of the second phase of the National Gender Equality Policy 2020-2024.

OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

The structure of the report is as follows: **Chapter 2** outlines the Methods used for data collection during field research in Vanuatu. **Chapter 3** offers background on Vanuatu including: the general geography of the country, gender dynamics and SOGI inclusion, an overview of the National Gender Equality Policy 2015-2019 and the surrounding national and international policy context, and a brief overview of current gender programming and project work in Vanuatu. The research findings are then detailed in **Chapter 4** – which explores factors affecting NGEP implementation – and **Chapter 5**, which focuses specifically on SOGI and the NGEP. Case studies on the Oxfam SEED tool are included in **Boxes** throughout the report. Conclusions are presented in **Chapter 6**.

2 METHODS

This report is primarily based on data collected during field research in Vanuatu in February and March 2020. Information was gathered from two main sources; key informant (KI) interviews and focus group discussions, and from two types of informant; individuals within institutions working on gender and SOGI equality in Vanuatu, and members of communities in villages where the Oxfam SEED tool has been piloted.

An initial list of respondents and relevant organisations was identified through internet searches and verified through consultation with project staff at Oxfam in Vanuatu (OiV). The scope was limited to formal institutions based in the capital, Port Vila, where the government and the majority of national and international organisations working on gender have their main offices. A mix of government, local NGO and international NGO respondents were identified and contacted. In total, nine respondents were available for interview from the organisations shown in Table 1. The sample provides a range of governmental and non-governmental, national and international perspectives. The government ministries were chosen for having staff positions, policies and/or practices focused on gender. Overall, two respondents were male and the rest were female. Several attempts were made to arrange interviews with the Department of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Justice and Community Services but no response was received. It was also not possible to interview the author of the NGEP as they were unavailable during the period of data collection.

Table 1: Organisations providing key informant interviews for the research

Governmental	Local NGO	International NGO
Ministry of Education and Training	Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC)	Care International
Ministry of Climate Change and Natural Hazards	VPride	UN Women
	Vanuatu National Council for Women (VNCW)	Oxfam in Vanuatu ^b

Interviews were semi-structured, based on a set of open-ended questions. Topics included; an overview of ongoing gender work in the respondents' institutions, their awareness and knowledge of the NGEP and the NGEP 2, observations about implementation of the policies, insights into gender capacity and attitudes within institutions in Vanuatu and consideration of SOGI work and potential policy. The interviews were conducted by the consultant, Caitlin McCormack, and local researcher Linda Kenni, either together or separately. Interviews were conducted in English and recorded using a Dictaphone. The interview with VNCW was conducted by Linda Kenni in Bislama who relayed the information to Caitlin McCormack afterwards. In a couple of cases, brief follow-up meetings were arranged with respondents to clarify or add detail to points from the first interview. Responses are anonymised in the report.

Data was also collected in three case study sites where OiV had piloted the SEED tool, a framework for gender mainstreaming and sensitisation, in order to gather information about gender and SOGI dynamics, attitudes and experiences at a community level, and the potential to use tools like SEED to shift these^c (**Error! Reference source not found.**Box 4). The three sites were chosen for being where SEED has been implemented most comprehensively to date.

^b As this research was commissioned by Oxfam, interviews with Oxfam staff member were predominantly to gather contextual information. Any perspectives or opinions were verified with accounts from other Key Informants to reduce the risk of bias.

^c The focus is on the SEED tool primarily because this research was commissioned by Oxfam which meant that Oxfam in Vanuatu could facilitate access to SEED sites, data and respondents.

Box 1. The Oxfam SEED tool

The Gender-Just Social and Economic Empowerment Design – ‘SEED’ – tool is a framework developed by Oxfam Australia to mainstream gender within Oxfam and to promote gender-transformative programming involving co-creation by communities.

SEED consists of workshops which facilitate participants to identify key challenges, social dynamics and issues of inequality in their context. Gender is the underlying theme throughout discussions. SEED facilitators are comprehensively trained to lead discussions around gender and SOGI issues in communities where gender is *tabu*.

The intention of SEED is that communities self-identify the issues that exist within their communities. Workshops are designed to “*help them to unpack issues [and] identify hidden [causes]*”². This sensitisation is intended to then enable the community to work together to identify possible solutions to the challenges.

SEED consists of 5 modules:

1. **Economic Activity Assessment (EAA):** evaluation of formal and informal work
2. **Building Family Foundations (BFF):** family structures, the distribution of unpaid domestic work, and household financial management
3. **Growing Community Connections (GCC):** social support systems, access to services, leadership and power
4. **Resilience (R):** household and community sharing of subsistence work and resource management, and responses to disasters
5. **Paid Work Opportunities (PWO):** opportunities for income earning

Workshop outcomes provide insights into communities which can inform programming by Oxfam in Vanuatu (OiV) and others. During piloting, OiV have also identified potential for SEED to be used as a gender and SOGI sensitisation tool, both in communities and amongst facilitators. SEED has been piloted with a number of village communities and used to train facilitators from local NGOs. Case studies are included throughout this report.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured KI interviews were conducted with members of village communities to explore their experiences of the SEED activities, any developments since SEED implementation and perceived challenges for the community for the near future (

[Table 2](#)~~Table 2~~). Responses were recorded on flipchart paper using a combination of notes made by facilitators, and post-its stickers added by participants. Due to cultural sensitivities around the topic of gender and SOGI, and following the methodologies of the original SEED workshops, discussions focused on general activities, roles and social dynamics in the villages with gender and SOGI issues incorporated through careful prompts from the facilitators. Details of the data collection are given in

[Table 2](#)~~Table 2~~.

Table 2: Site and data collection details for SEED case studies

Case study site	Epule village, Efate Island	Mere Sauwia village, Nguna Island	Showground village, Santo Island
Date of SEED piloting	2016-2017	2018, last visit early 2019	November 2018
Modules delivered in pilot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Activity Assessment • Building Family Foundations • Growing Community Connections • Resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Activity Assessment • Building Family Foundations • Growing Community Connections • Resilience • Paid Work Opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Family Foundations • Growing Community Connections
Notes about pilot visits	<p>First SEED pilot. Led by external consultant. A number of challenges were encountered which affected the community's experience of the workshops³</p> <p>VPrize members attended as facilitators</p>	<p>First SEED pilot led by internal staff at Oxfam in Vanuatu.</p> <p>VPrize members attended some sessions as facilitators</p>	<p>Pilot delivered on behalf of VPrize in two villages chosen due to presence of SOGI individuals</p> <p>BFF and CC modules chosen to facilitate discussion about SOGI issues</p>
Date of visit for this project	7 th February 2020	13 th February 2020	17 th March 2020
Description of FGDs for this project	<p>Briefing with ~15 women, 5 men. Few attendees remembered participating in SEED. Group divided into two mixed-gender groups. One led by consultant with a scribe/translator, other led by local consultant. Discussion and notes in Bislama and translated.</p>	<p>Local consultant led data collection with two assistants. Briefing with 5 women and 11 men then group split into four mixed groups and asked three questions; What did you learn during the SEED training? Has anything changed in the community since SEED? What are the plans for the future?</p>	<p>Local consultant led data collection. FGD with 8 women and 2 men. Questions the same as for Mere Sauwia but with more probing for discussion of SOGI issues.</p>
Community KIs for this project	Female, 42	Female, 60 Female, 63 Male, 20	Female, 50 Female, 55

The intention was for gender-separated FGDs. However, men and women often arrived for the sessions at the same time and there was some apparent reluctance from the village Chief at the first site, Epule, to divide the group by gender^d. It was therefore decided to do mixed groups and this methodology was then replicated for subsequent sites. An advantage of this approach was that it allowed observation of gender dynamics amongst respondents in semi-formal discussions. In Santo, specific efforts were made to contact SOGI respondents but individuals were apparently unavailable.

Two of the KIs from organisations had experienced SEED being used as a sensitisation tool for training-of-facilitators. Interviews with these respondents included some questions exploring their insights on this.

A field diary was kept throughout the research visit to capture information from observations and informal conversations.

In addition to field data, contextual and additional information was gathered through a review of literature. Sources were identified through internet searching and by asking Key Informants for relevant documents.

^d Accounts from collaborators at Oxfam in Vanuatu suggested that the topic of gender is a *tabu* subject in many communities in Vanuatu and that, in relation to work delivered by international NGOs, there is often a perception that 'gender' refers to projects which target women and exclude men, with the result that men often opt out of participating in any work focused on gender. This may be one of the reasons behind the Epule Chief's suggestion that groups should include a mix of men and women and was a factor in the researchers' decision to comply with this.

3 BACKGROUND

GEOGRAPHY OF VANUATU

Vanuatu comprises 83 islands in the South Pacific Ocean (Figure 1) and has a population of approximately 290,000 people⁴. The majority of the population – 74% – is rural and their main sources of livelihood include subsistence farming, fishing and the production of cash crops including coconut, copra, cocoa and kava (*Piper methysticum*, the root of which is made into a traditional, mildly narcotic beverage)⁵. Tourism is also significant source of income, accounting for around 40% of GDP, and financial services are another major sector of the economy⁶.

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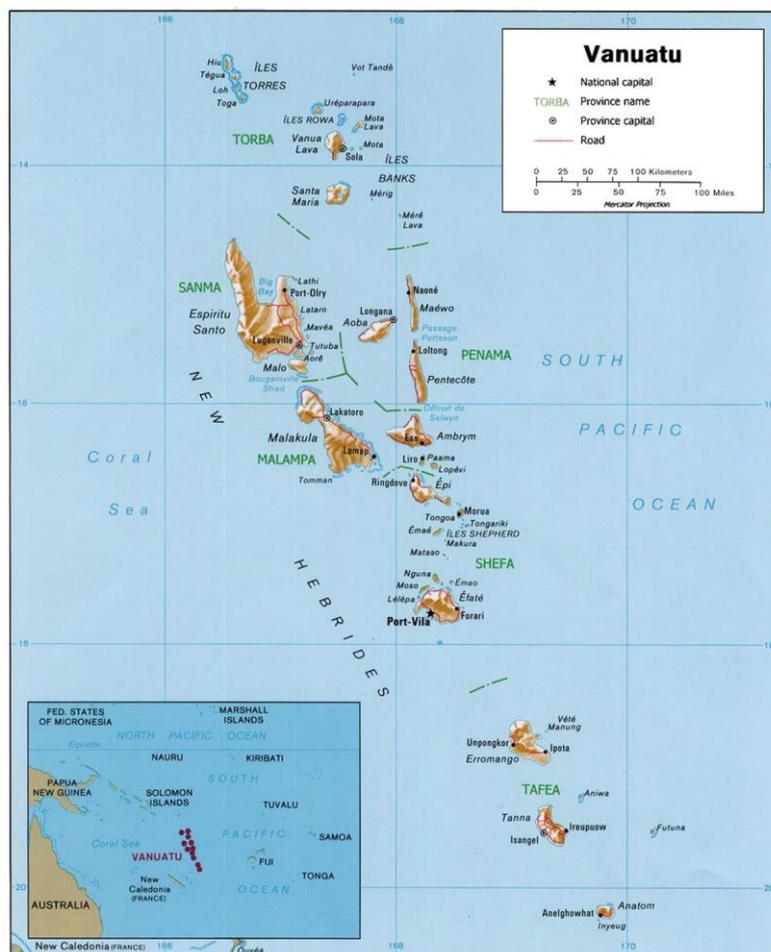


Figure 1. Map of Vanuatu showing islands, provinces and location in South Pacific Ocean. Source: nationsonline.org

Vanuatu is currently ranked as a least developed country but is expected to graduate towards developing country status in December 2020⁷. Compared to other least developed countries, Vanuatu has a relatively high income per capita and life expectancy, its institutions and human capital are strong⁸, and levels of wellbeing are high^{9,10}. However, Vanuatu is highly vulnerable to natural hazards including cyclones and volcanic activity¹¹ which cause significant external shocks to the country's society and economy and present a critical challenge to development.

GENDER IN VANUATU

As for many countries, gender inequality is a persistent development challenge for Vanuatu. In terms of economy, the average gross national income for women in Vanuatu is around \$1,200 lower than for men¹². Women also occupy a smaller share of most types of formal employment, filling fewer than 40% of jobs across the private and public sectors¹³ and more women than men (49% vs 41%) are engaged in subsistence livelihoods meaning their sources of income are less secure.

In education too, expected years of schooling are slightly lower for girls than boys¹⁴ and a greater proportion of women than men have never been to school. This gap is closing in younger generations, but rates of secondary and tertiary education attainment remain overall lower for women than for men at 25.3% vs 27.4% and 3.3 vs 4.5%, respectively¹⁵.

Maternal mortality in Vanuatu is slightly higher than the average for Pacific Island small states at 72 per 100,000¹⁶ and although teenage pregnancy rates have fallen significantly in the past 20 years¹⁷, they remain higher than the global average at 49 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19¹⁸.

A particular issue for gender equality in Vanuatu is a lack of representation of women in leadership and decision-making forums. A 2009 census found that the proportion of elected officials, senior officials and managers who were women was less than one third (29%)¹⁹. Strong traditional cultural norms – known as '*kastom*' in Vanuatu – as well as patriarchal values introduced through Christianity and colonial power structures²⁰ dictate that leadership roles are the domain of men and that women should fulfil supportive roles. As a consequence, there are currently no female members of Parliament and women account for only seven out of the 48 Director and Director General positions in the Vanuatu government^{21,22,23}.

Gender-based violence is also a critical issue in Vanuatu. A report in 2011 by the Vanuatu Women's Centre which surveyed 3,750 women across Vanuatu found that 60% of women who had ever been in a relationship had experienced either physical or sexual abuse by a partner, and more than 2 in 3 had experienced emotional abuse²⁴.

There has been some progress on addressing these issues. For example, the proportion of women in waged employment has increased, the number of women Directors in government is a new record for Vanuatu, teenage pregnancy has fallen, gaps in education are closing and the introduction of the Family Protection Act in 2008 indicates progress towards addressing the issue of gender-based violence.

Vanuatu has signed the international Convention to Elimination All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action – an international framework for advancing women’s rights – which commits it to making progress on gender equality.

In line with these commitments, Vanuatu introduced the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP), one of the first policies to explicitly address gender inequality in the country. Following endorsement by the Council of Ministers, the NGEP was introduced in 2016. It lapsed in 2019 and a second phase – the National Gender Equality Policy 2020-2024 (NGEP2) – will replace it.

In preparation for this next phase, a comprehensive review of the NGEP was conducted by the Vanuatu government’s Department of Women’s Affairs (DWA) at the end of 2019. Surveys and interviews with stakeholders from provincial to national level were conducted to measure outcomes of the policy on the ground.

Successful implementation of the policies critically depends on capacity, awareness and support amongst the people and institutions whose work will influence, and be influenced by, the policies. It is therefore important to capture the experiences of these individuals to identify challenges and possible solutions and opportunities for the implementation of gender policy and work in Vanuatu.

SOGI INCLUSION

A specific focus in this research is on the inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI+) – or Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) – issues within policy and programming in Vanuatu.

There is increasing focus internationally on equality for SOGI people and over the past decade, the United Nations (UN) have made several formal declarations on the topic. In 2008, the UN General Assembly made a statement in support of recognising SOGI rights as human rights, and in 2011, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) passed a resolution to document, for the first time, discriminatory laws, practices and acts of violence against SOGI people in members states. Most recently, in 2016, the UNHRC passed a resolution to appoint an Independent Expert to the General Assembly to lead work on Protection against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

The Vanuatu government has endorsed each of these UN resolutions^{25,26} and during a UN Universal Periodic Review^e in 2019 additionally took note of a recommendation to “*Implement specific measures to combat...discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, in order to guarantee the enjoyment of rights by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons*”²⁷.

Vanuatu decriminalised same-sex sexual conduct in 2007²⁸. This is in contrast to some other Pacific Island nations including Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tonga where same-sex relationships are illegal and punishable by a jail sentence²⁹.

However, although the Constitution contains general human rights protections for citizens regardless of “*race, place of origin, religious or traditional beliefs, political opinions, language or sex*”, there is no explicit mention of sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI)³⁰. There are almost no legal protections against discrimination towards SOGI persons in employment, education, health care, housing and the provision of goods and services. The only inclusions to date are in the Teaching Service Act 2013 which makes it an obligation for the Vanuatu Teaching Service Commission not to discriminate on the basis of “sexual preference” in employment³¹, and in the National Youth Authority Bill which includes “*those ... of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity*” in its definition of youth³².

In this regard, Vanuatu lags behind other Pacific Island nations; Fiji, Samoa and Kiribati have legal protections against discrimination in employment whilst Samoa also has protections against hate crimes and a National Human Rights Institution which is inclusive of sexual orientation in its human rights work^f (although, conversely, same-sex sexual conduct is still criminalised).

There is limited data on the prevalence of SOGI individuals in Vanuatu. They are not explicitly measured in government census data and the categories used in sex-disaggregated data collection by many NGOs do not accurately capture people of diverse genders, or any information about sexuality³³. Some indicative numbers from VPride, a charitable organisation working with SOGI communities in Vanuatu, show that across three of Vanuatu’s islands – Efate, Santo and Malakula – there are at least 400 transgender individuals, 100 gay and 100 lesbian individuals and 200 gender non-conforming individuals³⁴. These figures are an under-representation of prevalence in Vanuatu as numbers are not available for the remaining islands and many SOGI individuals are likely to be reluctant to identify themselves as such³⁵.

The first phase of the National Gender Equality Policy did not include any mention of SOGI individuals, despite reported lobbying by VPride and others. In the absence of dedicated SOGI policy, the NGEF offers a place to address it as a cross-cutting issue as SOGI equality can be seen to be related to gender equality – discrimination against SOGI individuals is often rooted in societal norms about gender and many of the barriers and challenges faced are similar^{36,37}. The NGEF offers the opportunity to address the topic within an existing framework, without the need for an additional policy or institutional capacity.

THE NATIONAL GENDER EQUALITY POLICY 2015-2019

The National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) was introduced in 2016, after a long process of development and consultation (Table 3Table-3). The development of the policy was led by the Department of Women’s Affairs (DWA) within the Ministry of Justice and Community Services (MJCS) and overall responsibility for the policy lies with the DWA. The policy document³⁸ was drafted by an independent consultant from Australia.

Table 3: National Gender Equality Policy Timeline in Vanuatu

National Gender Equality Policy Timeline
<p><u>2014</u> Department of Women’s Affairs (DWA) starts process of developing the NGEP, building on consultations conducted as part of a gender mapping in 2013 and with input from provincial and national governments, NGOs and development partners</p>
<p><u>July 2015</u> NGEP is endorsed by the Council of Ministers and DWA is tasked with conducting a review of progress towards the end of the policy period in late 2019</p>
<p><u>October-November 2019</u> DWA-led review of NGEP comprising:</p> <p><i>Provincial review:</i> a consultation team of agency heads and technical officers from government and NGOs conduct consultations in 37 communities throughout the provinces using the ‘Most Significant Change’ technique⁹, to evaluate impacts of the NGEP</p> <p><i>Review workshop:</i> DWA and Department of Justice and Community Services hold a 2-day workshop with NGOs and CSOs to review progress with the NGEP</p>
<p><u>November 2019</u> Validation workshop: two weeks after review workshop, a summary of the outcomes of the provincial review and the review workshop are presented to participants for validation, along with a proposed framework for the NGEP2</p>
<p><u>December 2019 – present</u> Planning and drafting of NGEP second phase</p>
<p><u>March 2020</u> DWA publishes report of review³⁹. Next steps to finalise policy document and develop Monitoring and Evaluation framework and Implementation Plan are ongoing.</p>
<p><u>June 2020</u> Scheduled introduction of the NGEP2 2020-2024</p>

The NGEP contains a Policy Vision and Mission, detailed background on the state of gender equality in Vanuatu, an overview of the national and international policy context, a statement of purpose, and overall operating principles. The policy comprises four strategic areas:

1. Reducing Domestic and Gender Based Violence
2. Enhancing Women’s Economic Empowerment

^e A UN process in which states peer-review each other on their human rights records

^f Vanuatu does not currently have a National Human Rights Institution, but there is work underway to establish one.

^g The Most Significant Change technique involves the collection of stories of ‘significant change’ from stakeholders. It is particularly effective for capturing changes in attitudes and perceptions, which are intangible and often difficult to measure.

3. Promoting Women’s Leadership and Equal Political Participation
4. Building a Foundation for Gender Mainstreaming

The latter half of the policy outlines a Strategic Plan of Action to “*translat[e] policy statements into practice*” and “*mobiliz[e] action and support from the government, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), faith-based organisations, development partners, private sector, educational and training providers and communities*”. For each strategic area, Key Strategies are shortlisted and Indicators are outlined. There is a descriptive summary of a plan for Implementation and Monitoring, Review and Reporting. There is mention of a separate Monitoring and Evaluation Plan and creation of a Policy Committee to oversee policy progress.

In October and November 2019, the DWA reviewed the NGEF. The review process comprised surveys of key stakeholders from provincial to national level to evaluate progress with policy implementation. The surveys were followed by a two-day workshop in Port Vila where representatives of local and international organisations discussed their perspectives on progress with the NGEF in Vanuatu^h. The outcomes of the surveys and workshop were analysed by the same independent consultant who wrote the NGEF and presented back to the workshop attendees two weeks later at a validation workshop. At the time of this research, the consultant was using the outcomes to draft the second phase of the policy for 2020-2024, NGEF 2.

POLICY CONTEXT

A number of national and international policies create the context for the creation and introduction of the National Gender Equality Policy in Vanuatu. An overview of some of the most relevant ones is given here.

National policy context

The National Gender Equality Policy is one of the first national policies in Vanuatu explicitly focused on gender equality. A previous **Gender Equity Policy** was introduced in 1997 under the Comprehensive Reform Programme but a 2006 review led by the Department of Women’s Affairs (DWA) concluded that implementation was limited due to 21 key barriers including:

- I. lack of government resources and commitment;
- II. dominance of men in Parliament and political parties,
- III. traditional beliefs that a woman’s place is not as a leader;
- IV. belief that custom laws do not need changing;
- V. continued belief in the inferiority of women by women as well as by men;

^h The report authors were not involved in this review process. Several Key Informants gave accounts of the process and the workshops.

- VI. the idea that promoting women's rights is incompatible with Christian principles,
- VII. the endemic nature of gender-based violence.
- VIII. a Gender Equity Task Force created to oversee the policy did not last
- IX. the lack of any supporting policies created a challenging environment for the success of the policy⁴⁰

None of the Key Informants interviewed in this study mentioned the Gender Equity Policy and either reported that there had been no previous policies on gender equality, or suggested the **Family Protection Act** 2008⁴¹ was the most relevant. This focuses on domestic violence, providing legal protection for victims and punishment for perpetrators. Its introduction after more than eight years of consultation was a milestone in progress towards gender equality policy in Vanuatu, yet implementation has remained slow, despite it being in place for over a decade⁴².

The **Constitution of Vanuatu** was also cited by KIs as containing a commitment to gender equality. Article 5(1) of the Constitution states; "*The Republic of Vanuatu recognises, that...all persons are entitled to...fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual without discrimination on the grounds of race, place of origin, religious or traditional beliefs, political opinions, language or sex*"⁴³ (emphasis added). It also allows for laws and actions "*for the special benefit, welfare, protection or advancement of females...*". However, this was regarded by KIs as a relatively weak inclusion of gender and does not constitute a comprehensive definition of discrimination of women, as required under Vanuatu's commitment to the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**, discussed further below. There is reportedly no time frame for amending the Constitution in line with CEDAW and any amendments require a parliamentary majority, something which the Vanuatu Government had not yet achieved⁴⁴.

In 2016, Vanuatu also introduced the **Vanuatu National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2030 (NSDP)**⁴⁵. This was published after the introduction of the NGEF but was relevant during its implementation and to the second phase, the NGEF 2. This includes a commitment to pursue "An inclusive society... where the rights of all Ni-Vanuatu including women...are supported, protected and promoted in our legislation and institutions" and specifies the implementation of gender responsive planning and budgeting processes, amongst several other objectives related to gender. The second phase of the NGEF is intended to be aligned and linked to the strategic objectives of the NSDP and other national development processes⁴⁶.

International Policy Context

Key Informants reported that Vanuatu's commitment to a number of international agreements contributed to the creation of the National Gender Equality Policy 2015-2019.

Most KIs suggested that Vanuatu's commitments under **CEDAW** were a major driver. Vanuatu ratified CEDAW in 1995. Amongst the obligations for signatory countries is the requirement to incorporate the Convention into domestic legislation. In 2014, Vanuatu submitted its combined 4th and 5th progress report to the CEDAW committee and a delegation attended a meeting in early

2016 to respond to feedback from the CEDAW committee. The committee specifically requested an update on progress with development, adoption and implementation of the NGE⁴⁷.

Vanuatu has also signed the **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA)** which enshrines a global commitment to equal rights and opportunities for women⁴⁸, and a number of KIs mentioned this as a driver for the creation of the NGE. A plan for implementing the BPfA in Vanuatu was introduced in 1996. Amongst the requirements is that Vanuatu should establish institutional mechanisms for gender equality such as policy and gender-responsive budgeting⁴⁹. Progress on Platform Plans was reported by countries for 'Beijing+20' in 2015 and 2020 marks 'Beijing+25', when progress is being reviewed 25 years after adoption. The period of the NGE coincides with this reporting, and the Vanuatu government cites the policy as an important achievement over the 5 years since Beijing +20⁵⁰.

Other relevant policies include the **Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality** which has existed since 1994 and sets the direction for the Pacific Islands region in improving outcomes for women⁵¹. Vanuatu endorsed the recent PPA on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights for 2018-2030. Vanuatu has also adopted the Sustainable Development Goals 2015, including Goal 5 on Gender Equality⁵².

OVERVIEW OF GENDER WORK IN VANUATU

Many of the NGOs working in Vanuatu have programming related to gender. There is no published map of the 3Ws – who, what, where – of gender work, although a general map of the activities of NGOs, development partners and government bodies is in development⁵³.

The Key Informants interviewed often work in collaboration with other organisations and were therefore able – in the absence of time to interview all organisations directly – to provide an overview of the current programmes and work areas of the major organisations working on gender in Vanuatu.

A snapshot of gender work by NGOs, as reported by Key Informants, is given in Table 4, categorised under the NGE's four strategic areas (~~Table 4~~Table 4). This gives an overview of some of the relevant actors working on gender in Vanuatu and an indication of the types and coverage of gender programming.

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Table 4: Snapshot of gender-focused projects currently being delivered by non-governmental organisations in Vanuatu

NGEP Strategic Area	NGO programmes
1. Reducing Domestic and Gender Based Violence	<p>World Vision – REACH (Relationship Education about Choices for Healing), including Men’s Behaviour Change program</p> <p>Vanuatu Women’s Centre – Male Advocate Training and general service delivery for victims of violence</p> <p>Care International – Leftemap Sista, Gender Equality Together Program</p> <p>Wan Smolbag – theatre to deliver awareness on gender-based violence</p>
2. Enhancing Women’s Economic Empowerment	<p>Care International – Leftemap Sista and Gender Equality Together, assist women to establish and expand income sources</p> <p>ActionAid – Women I Tok Tok Tugeta group to enhance women’s agency, leadership and collective working, including diversifying income sources</p> <p>UN Women – Markets for Change, to provide market facilities for women vendors</p>
3. Promoting Women’s Leadership and Equal Political Participation	<p>Oxfam – Vot Woman, funding to national women’s leadership conference and forum; Governance, Leadership and Accountability Program; Gender Justice, Youth and Livelihoods program networks facilitated to participate in government policy consultations</p> <p>Care International – Young Women in Leadership programme, Gender Equality Together program and Pacific Girl project</p> <p>Vanuatu Christian Council – work in the church promoting women in leadership roles</p> <p>ActionAid – Strengthening Girls Voices in Vanuatu</p> <p>Vanuatu National Council for Women (VNCW) – national women’s leadership conference and forum</p>
4. Building a Foundation for Gender Mainstreaming	<p>Care International – Gender Equality Together Gender Cohort</p> <p>Vanuatu Christian Council – work within the church around integrating gender</p>
5. Resilience*	<p>Care International – Disaster Ready Programme</p> <p>Vanuatu Women’s Centre</p> <p>ActionAid – Women-Led Climate Resilience and Adaptation⁵⁴</p>
LGBTQI+/SOGI issues**	<p>VPride</p> <p>Wan Smolbag</p> <p>Oxfam - institutional support and capacity building of VPride members</p> <p>Care International – inclusion and capacity building of VPride members</p> <p>Sista – strategic support to VPride and online information and campaigning on gender and LGBTQI+/SOGI rights in Vanuatu</p>
<p>Compiled based on accounts of Key Informants, which – in the absence of a published mapping of work – is how this information predominantly exists</p> <p>*New strategic area added after review of policy in November 2019</p> <p>**Not a Strategic Area of the NGEP, but a focus for this project</p>	

Note: The above list is an incomplete overview of ongoing work on gender equality by non-governmental organisation. It is outside the scope of this report to capture all gender focused work in Vanuatu, although this kind of mapping would be a valuable resource to coordinate efforts and something of this nature is reportedly planned for the NGEP 2.

4 FINDINGS

The National Gender Equality Policy has been in place for almost four years since its introduction in 2016.

This section draws on accounts from key informants working on gender in Vanuatu to provide insights into the experience of working with the National Gender Equality Policy from the perspective of those whose work is relevant to implementing the NGEF. The section is arranged by key themes which emerged from across the interviews: attitudes towards gender in Vanuatu; awareness of the policy; implementation, monitoring and evaluation; coordination; government implementation capacity, and; gender infrastructure within institutions.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS GENDER IN VANUATU

The introduction of the national gender equality policy can be considered a significant achievement in Vanuatu. As one KI described it, culture (or *kastom*) and the church (Christianity) constitute the influential “gate-keeping” institutions which shape the context for any potential progress on gender equality. Both were described by respondents as being characterised by strongly patriarchal norms and practices. Positions of leadership and decision-making, for example, are still predominantly filled by men, reflecting traditional beliefs that women should not occupy positions of leadership. There are currently no female members of parliament in Vanuatu, and, despite some progress towards women’s involvement in decision-making in the church, it remains quite strongly male-dominated.

This domination of men in positions of power is likely to create resistance to progress on gender. As one KI from a government Ministry stated, in order to make progress with gender; “...*you need that support. and if you don't have superiors who are gender sensitive, it can be very tricky*” (Key Informant 1). Lack of political will is identified by the Ministry of Justice and Community Services as a significant challenge to progress on gender equality⁵⁵ and one of the reasons why there has been relatively little tangible implementation of the Family Protection Act despite it being introduced over 10 years ago⁵⁶.

The introduction of the NGEF is therefore a significant step towards furthering gender equality in Vanuatu. The document itself is strong on the conceptualisation and definition of gender inequality and it defines ambitious targets in the form of key strategies and indicators under the four strategic areas. It has the potential to drive action on gender equality which had previously far been lacking. As one KI describes it, it legitimises efforts on gender work; “*The government should take the lead on the gender equality issue. [We] cannot be talking about this if [we] don't have a national gender policy.*” (Key Informant 2).

Box 2. SEED Case Study: The potential to change attitudes around gender

Oxfam delivered SEED workshops in Epule village, Efate Island in 2016 and 2017. Community memory of SEED was limited as there had been no follow-up. However, discussions revealed some indications of impacts of the SEED discussions.

Hints of SEED success:

- FGD participants reported that, since SEED, men take more responsibility for childcare and chores (cooking, laundry) when women are at market in Port Vila or are pregnant. During the original SEED workshops, women noted that they had never openly discussed the share of the care work before SEED offered a forum.
- Community members have learned to save money for when they need it, for example for hospital fees
- One single mother had been empowered to participate in a seasonal worker programme. Her parents helped with childcare and she could reimburse them
- A trans or non-binary member of the community joined the FGDs for this research, sitting with the women and participating in the discussions

Testimonial: Leslyn, 42, female, had participated in all SEED sessions and reported that, through SEED, members of the village were more open-minded; *“We realise that there are other ways to do things. We have thought about things we’ve never thought about before”*. She also described a change in attitudes to people with disabilities and other marginalised members of the community and that she had learned that it is not just the traditional family structure that is stable; *“Other families can also be stable”*.

Persistent challenges and lessons:

- Participants described ongoing conflicts between men and women over household finances and that care and domestic work remains predominantly done by women
- However, many women in the FGDs perceived that the current division of roles and power between men and women are how they should be and do not need changing
- Communities need follow-up visits to reinforce learnings, especially when topics are complex and challenging to existing social norms as gender and SOGI are
- Material development challenges (water supply, access to markets) remain at the forefront of people’s minds and intrinsic gender dynamics are not always recognised

¹ Other religions are practised in Vanuatu but Christianity is the dominant religion.

² SEED discussions in the Building Family Foundations module include a flash-card activity which depicts same-sex couples and trans or non-binary individuals as examples of different family structures that exist

AWARENESS OF THE POLICY

Familiarity with the NGEF varied amongst respondents, which was reportedly indicative of awareness of the policy more broadly. One Ministry informant reported observing that in consultations during the NGEF review process; *“A lot of the ministries were not too well versed with the policy”* (Key Informant 3). This lack of familiarity with the contents and requirements of the policy will be a challenge to progress on delivering policy objectives. Informants reported that, as far as they were aware, there was no specific communication about the NGEF when it was introduced and, in particular, no training or awareness-raising about how the policy should be implemented in the work of government ministries or development actors.

Another informant working in a key gender coordination role in an organisation demonstrated a lack of awareness of the policy implementation period – *“The first one was a 4-year policy, or 3 or 2, I forgot”* and *“I think the timeframe of the policy should be a bit longer; 4 or 5 years”* (Key Informant 2) – which also implies that ongoing alignment with the policy is not yet a priority for this organisation.

As one informant stated, as one of the first national gender equality policies, it may take time for the NGEF to be incorporated in the work of organisations; *“With this one, because it's the first government policy, I don't know whether a lot of organisations have picked up the strategic objectives of [the] policy and implemented them.”*(Key Informant 2) Another informant, from one of the Ministries, stated that a key thing to facilitate implementation of the second phase of the NGEF would be; *“Having communications and more visibility and marketing of the policy with partners just to say; ‘This is a policy that exists...’”* (Key Informant 3).

An apparent lack of familiarity with the NGEF amongst individuals involved in work on gender equality presents a critical barrier to effective implementation of the policy.

IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

One key informant, from the Ministry of Education, felt that the policy made it clear what progress on the key strategies should entail; *“It is very clear what needed to be implemented”* (Key Informant 1).

However, several other Key Informants reported that they were not aware of any implementation plan and suggested that this had been a significant factor which had meant that implementation of the policy had not been as extensive as it might otherwise have been.

There was also, according to KIs, no monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework which makes it challenging to assess progress with implementation⁵⁷; *“It is [hard to know what has been implemented] because we couldn’t measure anything”* (Key Informant 4). The only M&E was reported to be the DWA review at the end of the policy period in 2019. KIs from both NGOs and the government ministries had not observed any other ongoing monitoring during the policy implementation.

In the absence of baseline data against which to measure progress, the DWA review gathered data using the Most Significant Change technique which collects narrative accounts of achievements and challenges. This provides valuable insight into how the policy implementation is being experienced by people but is less reliable for measuring progress against quantitative indicators. The review does itself now provide some evidence against which progress with the new phase of the policy can be compared, but a more extensive and ongoing process of monitoring could provide more useful data.

According to KIs, it is planned that the NGEF 2 will include a comprehensive implementation plan and M&E framework, which they saw as key to improving progress with work towards gender equality objectives.

It was not clear whether current collection and availability of gender data was sufficient for monitoring progress. A minimum requirement is recording of sex disaggregated data, which the NGEF states is a *“necessary part of gender analysis”*. Some informants from both NGOs and ministries reported that their institutions collect sex-and-age-disaggregated data. This data collection was mainly associated with project work, and did not currently seem to be systematically reported to the DWA unless requested; *“We use it in our project reporting and if we were asked to report to DWA about people reach through our programmes, we would be able to provide that data”* (Key Informant 5). As one informant identified, there was a gender monograph as part of the census in 2009⁵⁸, but in the 2016 mini-census, the only data that was sex-disaggregated was access to education whilst everything else was recorded by household. No specific data is currently collected on SOGI individuals in Vanuatu and the categories often used by NGOs when collecting sex-disaggregated data do not capture individuals of diverse genders.

In order to usefully inform gender objectives and efforts, the data must also be used effectively once it is collated. There was seen to be a critical lack in expertise around analysis of gender

data, both in the government and internally in NGOs; “Analysis has been the real issue because capacity doesn’t exist to analysis this kind of data” (Key Informant 6).

Sex-disaggregated data is fundamental to measuring impacts of gender work but is also a relatively basic measure, capturing presence of men and women during project activities but not longer-term impacts for gender equality (see [Box 3](#)~~Box 4~~). One informant indicated that their institution also collects further evidence to also look at “actual benefits in terms of impacts, for example on women’s livelihoods, or girls in [education]” (Key Informant 3).

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Box 34. SEED Case Study: the need for ongoing implementation and M&E

Mere Sauwia village, Nguna Island was visited by OiV to deliver SEED workshops in 2018 with occasional follow-up visits in 2019.

Hints of SEED success:

- Participants reported that incidence of violence in the community has declined over the course of SEED visits, particularly gossiping (emotional violence) and conflict over control of household finances, especially about money that women earn (economic violence). Reflections during the SEED workshops show that violence against women was a key issue people – including the village chief – took from the discussions
- An increase in participation in the seasonal worker programme^k was seen by the community to be linked to SEED sessions on economic opportunities
- A community savings cooperative was established, led by a (young, male) community member who had attended SEED trainings
- According to SEED facilitators, the community came to accept and embrace a non-binary SEED facilitator during the course of the workshop sessions

Persistent challenges and the need for ongoing implementation and monitoring:

- Despite improvements in relation to reducing violence, the community reported that there are still incidences and further work is still needed
- Follow-up visits were seen to be critical to reinforce learnings. As a member of the community noted; “Running of trainings has to be continuous and not become a one-off thing”

Identifying and addressing persistent challenges – particularly those related to changing societal norms e.g. around gender – requires ongoing implementation action and M&E that goes beyond collection of sex-disaggregated attendance data.

^k A programme of the Australian Government in which workers from Vanuatu and elsewhere travel to Australia to fulfil seasonal employment gaps, for example in agriculture (e.g. fruit picking) and accommodation sectors

COORDINATION

Key Informants suggested that there is considerable potential to improve implementation of the policy through enhanced coordination of NGO efforts. As one KI stated; *“That’s one of the challenges I see on gender; there is not good alignment of the work that’s done on gender in Vanuatu”* (Key Informant 2).

According to KIs, and from observations during field work, there is significant capacity around gender programming in Vanuatu in terms of expertise and ongoing work within NGOs and development partners (see [Table 4](#)). Given resource restrictions faced by the DWA, discussed further below, harnessing this could be invaluable in the implementation of the NGEF.

Key Informants suggested that explicit coordination of NGO work across the NGEF strategic areas – in order to avoid gaps on the one hand or duplication of efforts on the other – would be an effective way to improve implementation of the policy; *“There should be more coordination between the government and the NGOs. [The government should identify] what is it that [it] wants to implement...[then] they should work closely with the NGOs because – unless they have the resources themselves – NGOs will be the people to [implement] gender work”* (Key Informant 2).

There is, however, currently a lack of information on exactly what gender work government, NGO and development partner agencies are implementing⁵⁹. There was previously a mapping of gender work in the areas of economic empowerment, political engagement and gender-based violence by the World Bank in 2013⁶⁰, and one informant reported current work by VANGO⁶¹ to map all development work in Vanuatu. As one KI stated; *“This kind of mapping goes on but needs bringing together. This would be really useful”* (Key Informant 6).

According to informants, better coordination of agencies’ work is a challenge that has been recognised by the DWA and there will be measures to address this in the NGEF 2. KIs stated that there is an intention to create an implementation plan which would assign or ‘map’ the work of NGOs and other development agencies across the NGEF four strategic areas.

NGO informants reported that there is already good complementarity between the coverage of their programming and the NGEF. The strategic areas of the policy are relatively “high-level”, so programmatic priorities around gender are likely to fit within them without much need for adjustment. There also seem to be some efforts already to coordinate and collaborate on programming. For example, Care International reported designing their resilience work to be deliberately complimentary to Oxfam’s approach and there is (government instigated) geographic coordination on work with Community Disaster and Climate Change Committees (CDCCC) which integrate gender through a minimum requirement for female representation (see [Error! Reference source not found. Box 3](#)); they are managed by Care International in Tafea, Oxfam in Efate, Save the Children in Sanma, ActionAid in Efate and Tafea, and World Vision in Sanma and Malampa.

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However, there is – as one Key Informant described it – a “*chicken and egg*” challenge with matching agency programming to the NGEF strategic areas. NGO projects are strongly dependent on donor priorities which may or may not match the policy priorities; “*It's almost impossible to firmly sign up [to a strategic area] as an NGO that doesn't [yet] have the money or resourcing [for that particular focus]*”. Similarly, it often happens that; “*Someone says 'we can do that' and you say 'hang on, we've already got the resourcing or an existing project on that'*” (Key Informant 5).

Several informants saw the need for a lead agency to work specifically on coordinating the implementation of the NGEF across the different organisations. It was suggested that the DWA would be best placed to take this on, and that this should be its main role on the policy with any actual implementation activities being delivered by NGOs.

It was acknowledged that capacity and resourcing present challenges to DWA (explored further below) and another KI suggested that; “*For gender to actually gain a foothold...within the whole development sector, [the lead] will need to come from the Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination (DSSPAC) which deals with national planning*” (Key Informant 3). DSSPAC sits within the Prime Minister’s office and has responsibility for ‘whole government approaches on important issues’⁶². However, KIs suggested that DSSPAC may not currently have the expertise or resources to dedicate to gender and take this role on; “*I think that department is unsure how they're supposed to be doing [gender] and they're doing a whole heap of other things already*” (Key Informant 3).

GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTATION CAPACITY

Key informants perceived that, so far, responsibility for both coordination and implementation of the NGEF had tended to fall to the DWA.

KIs identified that the DWA was challenged in its ability to take on this responsibility due to insufficient funding. The DWA budget in 2015 comprised just 0.17% of the national budget, and in 2019, this dropped to 0.11%. In addition, this budget was allocated for staffing and operational costs and critically, there was no specific budget for programming or for implementation of the NGEF⁶³. The NGEF wording acknowledges that *“policies [with a focus] on women [have] relied heavily on DWA as a lead agency for implementing policy actions, yet it did not have the... financial capacity to take on such a role”*⁶⁴.

Encouragingly, in 2019 DWA received funding of NZ\$1million from the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade towards its staffing and programming⁶⁵. However, the funding appears to be primarily intended for implementation of work related to the Pacific-wide Partnership to End Violence Against Women and Girls program⁶⁶. It is unclear how much, if any, is available for delivery of the NGEF or for work related to strategic areas other than gender-based violence.

In addition to limited financial capacity, informants perceived that DWA faces challenges in terms of both human capacity (staffing) and technical capacity (expertise and experience) for policy implementation. As one key informant reported, two members of DWA staff – including one senior member of staff – were currently or imminently away on scholarship placements, whilst the DWA’s Women’s Economic Empowerment Officer position has been vacant since 2017⁶⁷. This leaves the department with a limited number of officers to carry out work.

There was also perceived to be a shortage of expertise around policy implementation within the DWA. The DWA itself identifies the need for more expertise around the areas of implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and gender mainstreaming⁶⁸. The NGEF wording itself acknowledges that the DWA *“did not have the technical...capacity”* to take the lead on implementing actions under the policy.

Some technical support is provided by external agencies; since 2018, a Gender Advisor from UN Women has had a seat within the DWA and has provided expertise on gender and policy. Care International also works closely with the Department and provides expertise and guidance where needed, as well as providing capacity-building to a Gender Cohort which has included key technical officers from government, NGOs and other organisations.

As discussed in the previous section, the collective programming and resources of NGOs and other development agencies in Vanuatu constitutes a significant potential resource for implementing actions under the NGEF but needs effective coordination to ensure alignment with, and across, the four strategic areas of the NGEF.

This was reportedly highlighted during the review of the NGEF and KIs stated that there seemed to be intentions that the DWA would focus primarily on the role of coordination in the NGEF 2.

GENDER INFRASTRUCTURE WITHIN INSTITUTIONS

Progress with implementation of the NGEF, the NGEF 2 and with other gender work will be aided by the existence of gender capacity and infrastructure within key institutions in Vanuatu.

An achievement in this area is the recent appointment of Gender Focal Points (GFPs) within some ministries including Climate Change and Natural Hazards, Education, Health, Justice and Community Services, and Land and Natural Resources⁶⁹. These GFPs are responsible for overseeing the integration of gender in the work and operations of the ministries. Informants from the Ministry of Climate Change and the Ministry of Education saw the GFPs as a valuable focal contact to provide accountability for progress on gender, and to act as a channel to facilitate the integration of gender into both the internal workings of the ministries and the policies they implement. A similar role is also fulfilled by the Gender Coordinator in the Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC – an umbrella body for Christian churches in Vanuatu) who ensures that churches are aware of gender equality and integrate it into their activities.

The appointment of GFPs was seen to be contributing to greater attention on gender within institutions; *“I think there is a groundswell of gender being incorporated [in ministry work], for example in agriculture, water and climate change... I think it’s becoming more and more ‘mainstream’”* (Key Informant 3). Nevertheless, such gender mainstreaming was seen by one NGO informant as an area that needed particular focus and resourcing; *“[Gender mainstreaming]’s a real priority under the policy that I think is not getting resourced as needed. The DWA and Director have been crying out for help on that for a long time. It’s a big thing and it needs to be resourced”* (Key Informant 5).

The existence of technical capacity or specific gender expertise amongst those appointed as GFPs also remains a challenge. Roles were reported by KIs to be mostly allocated to permanent officers who have worked in the Ministries for a while and so *“know the system”* (Key Informant 1), rather than to people with specific gender expertise. One KI who is the GFP within one of the Ministries reported they had not received specific training after being appointed to the role (although they had inherited the role from a predecessor). They described that they had independently accessed training through Care International’s Gender Cohort programme which aims to strengthen the gender capacity of civil society and government actors. The KI reported that they had to *“really make time”* to fit this comprehensive training around their full-time work duties but now felt that they could now use Care International for further support. Similarly, a KI at VCC was the first Gender Coordinator and described the challenge of not having specific support or training on gender; *“I was the first [Gender Coordinator], I was struggling along because I didn’t know what to do.”* They described similarly building their expertise with the support of an NGO. UN Women had paid for them to attend training in Fiji at the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre; *“UN women are the ones that really empowered me and helped me a lot. That’s given me the confidence [to work on gender]”*.

Limited time and resources were identified as another significant challenge for GFPs fulfilling their roles. The roles are appointed on top of the individual's existing day jobs and informants reported finding it difficult to make time for both, especially when there is not additional resourcing for GFP duties¹. This is particularly true at the moment when the roles and responsibilities are novel and require extra time to become familiar with; *"[Gender]; it's new, we're finding our way around and having existing roles as permanent officers which are also demanding"* (Key Informant 1). The GFP at the Ministry, and the VCC Gender Coordinator both stated that in their roles they are also responsible for work on disability and child protection and described that this broad remit meant that their time was stretched.

KIs also described that support and buy-in from other colleagues is critical to progress with gender work. The informant from the Ministry of Education described that their predominantly male senior colleagues were relatively unaware of gender inequality and suggested there is a critical need for broader sensitisation, awareness-raising and capacity-building around gender amongst government staff.

As one KI stated; *"Having a focal point is good but you also need a community of practice within a ministry...You need this critical mass with expertise and knowledge to ensure gender is embedded within all [the] different initiatives and discussions"* (Key Informant 3). Another agreed that; *"A lot of what is needed is raising awareness [within the Ministry]. It's all about behavioural change and acceptance"* (Key Informant 1). They described that this sensitisation would have to be done sensitively with gender disguised within the discussions; *"Because we have to accept the context of where we are, we have to find ways around what the norms are here"* (Key Informant 1). The respondent from VCC similarly reported that to get support from male colleagues in leadership positions, they disguised discussions of gender under the theme of human rights, because; *"With the church it's hard to just come up and talk [to male colleagues] about gender equality. So, I go in through the human rights perspective, because they know that human rights are something that God has given"*. Demonstrating the influence of Christianity in Vanuatu society, they also described that an advantage for the VCC *"...is that most of our work is aligned with biblical principles...The majority of people [in Vanuatu] are Christian. So, when you align with Christian principles, [people believe]; 'God has laid a plan for us...[so] there's a way forward for how we go about this'"*.

Following the introduction of the NGEF, the Ministry of Education and Training has developed its own Gender Equity in Education Policy, which was introduced in 2018. This was *"a big step forward, but also at the time a big task"* (Key Informant 1), according to one KI. Limited time, resources and a lack of oversight to provide accountability for progress were seen to limit implementation of the policy so far. The KI also described that the topic of gender is new within the Ministry and a lack of expertise or prior experience with how to work on gender is also a challenge to progress. They report that much of the work on the GEEP has reportedly been through financial and technical support from the Vanuatu Education Support Program funded by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Gender expertise is therefore often initially external, although can build internal capacity. As an informant in the Ministry of Climate Change described, gender specialists provided by project partners can *"help build*

¹ In 2017 the Council of Ministers approved gender responsive budgeting across five ministries (Decision 94, 2017) but this was not articulated in the Government's 2019 Budget Statement.

[government] capacity so they'll have the knowledge of, or eye for, gender issues when implementing [future] projects”.

Box 43. Women's leadership in Community Disaster and Climate Change Committees

A number of informants mentioned requirements for minimum representation of women on Community Disaster and Climate Change committees (CDCCC).

CDCCC were formed by the Vanuatu Meteorology and Geo-hazards Department and National Disaster Management Office on behalf of the government and are responsible for coordinating local level responses to climate change and natural hazards.

It is a requirement that one third of committee leaders are women. Informants report that this has successfully led to increased representation of women in decision-making; *“That was something that came out in the [NGEP] consultation – CDCCC are helping in terms of leadership opportunities”* (KI 3).

One informant reported that this had knock-on positive impacts for gender equality and women's leadership more broadly; *“CDCCC are relatively accessible for women to become leaders in compared to [other] committees which are more contested and political. They offer space for women to lead and to demonstrate to the community that they can do it”* (KI 5).

However, a participation quota does not address challenges women face in applying for these positions, including internalised beliefs that women are not suited to leadership. Sensitisation tools such as SEED may offer a means to address this; a woman who attended SEED workshops in Mere Sauwia, Nguna island (see [Box 3](#)[Box 4](#)) subsequently became a CDCCC committee leader and recounted to a member of Oxfam staff that she had pursued the role because SEED had raised her awareness and confidence in her right to participate in decision-making forums.

<http://www.ndmo.gov.vu/news/138-tsunami-response-plans?highlight=WyJjZGNjYyJd>

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Within the Ministry of Climate Change, although there is no specific internal gender policy, gender is included as a 'cross-cutting issue' within the Vanuatu Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2016-2030⁷⁰. Although the inclusion is a positive step, an informant reported that a review of this policy concluded that the inclusion of gender was so far broad-brush and lacked detail on actions for implementation; *“I guess those are some of the gaps at the moment”* (Key Informant 3). Gender considerations have also been integrated within some of the Ministry's Standard Operating Procedures. This is mainly in relation to the design and delivery of projects, which the Ministry often does in partnership with external partners and donors. For example, gender is now one of the criteria against which project proposals submitted to the Ministry are appraised. Additionally, the informant reported that gender is included in M&E following project implementation and that Community Disaster and Climate Change committees (CDCCC) – through which community level work on climate change resilience is often coordinated – have a minimum requirement for female representation which has been seen to have knock-on effects for women's participation in wider decision-making ([Box 4](#)[Box 3](#)).

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The VCC also has its own Gender Equality Policy. The first iteration of this was introduced in 2013, pre-dating the NGEP. The policy was updated in 2017, and the strategic areas were specifically updated to integrate those of the NGEP. As the VCC KI described; *“We want to work closely with the government...we want to implement the policies of the government... [By including the NGEP strategic areas we are] confirming our support of what the government is doing”*.

Both the Ministry of Education and VCC informants reported that having specific written policies about gender equality had prompted progress on gender; *“The issues have always been there, but I guess having the policies in the [Education] sector gave the push forward”* and; *“If [the VCC] has this policy, it means that whatever church you are in, you know are obliged to carry out some of the things in the gender policy”*. The described it as legitimising the topic of gender as a point of discussion with those in decision-making roles within their institutions.

5 SOGI AND THE NGEF

An area seen as a gap in the NGEF by some key informants was the lack of inclusion of SOGI issues. There is currently no explicit inclusion of SOGI in any policy in Vanuatu. Key informants suggested that the only place where inclusion might be interpreted is within mentions of vulnerable groups in the National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2030 mention of *“women, youth, the elderly and vulnerable groups”* and the Vanuatu Constitution’s mention of *“protection or advancement of females...[and] members of under-privileged groups”* (emphasis added). A video presentation by the Vanuatu delegation to the UN during its Universal Periodic Review reinforced this by featuring images of VPride, the only SOGI organisation in Vanuatu, during the mention of ‘vulnerable groups’⁷¹.

This wording is open to interpretation but given the generally limited acknowledgement of SOGI communities in Vanuatu, it seems likely that a narrow definition will usually be adopted unless there is strong pressure to do otherwise. As one Key Informant described; *“[People] know there’s an existence of LGBTQI people within this [discussion], but they just ignore it”* (Key Informant 7).

In the NGEF, the wording is less open to interpretation; *“There is a high level of diversity among men and women...certain groups are more vulnerable than others, including girls, young women, women with disabilities, widows and lone female headed households.”* (NGEF, page 12). The diversity and groups defined here are limited to sub-groups of girls and women. As one informant described it; *“The NGEF is quiet on [SOGI]”* (Key Informant 3).

Even if inclusion is interpreted, being *“hidden”* within the category of vulnerable groups was seen by one KI to create an unhelpfully negative and narrow picture of the SOGI community when, in reality; *“There are some within the LGBTQI+ world who are less fortunate, more fortunate, some are white collar, and some are blue collar. The white-collar ones [for example], they wouldn’t see themselves as a [part of a] minority group”* (Key Informant 7).

Without explicit acknowledgment, SOGI individuals fall through the gaps in policy and programming efforts; *“There’s a lot of ignorance in the sense [that] they don’t see...this particular population...because [they believe that] you’re either male or female”* (Key Informant 7). VPride membership numbers show the presence of at least 400 transgender individuals, 100 gay and 100 lesbian individuals and 200 gender non-conforming individuals on the islands of Efate, Santo and Malakula alone. However, official government data, such as the census, and sex-

disaggregated data collected by NGOs do not specifically capture these individuals. An example of the implications of this described by an informant was that during distribution of aid following a disaster, a trans member of the community was prevented from queuing as either a man or a woman and a family member had to go in their place⁷². As one informant described it; “*These people exist and they are suffering – ignoring them is a human rights issue*” (Key Informant 4). In the absence of specific policy on SOGI issues the NGEF was seen as the most likely and relevant place for it to be addressed.

SOGI RIGHTS IN VANUATU

There are, however, some positive signs for SOGI rights in Vanuatu. Firstly, in contrast to several other countries in the region, Vanuatu decriminalised same-sex sexual conduct in 2007.

The existence of VPride and its legal registration as an official charitable organisation in 2017 is a significant achievement in the context of the continued strong influence of conservative Christian principles in Vanuatu society⁷³. VPride was founded in 2007, originating as a peer education programme delivered by Wan Smolbag, an NGO focusing on HIV and sexual health. VPride now describes its remit as; “to educate, advocate and mobilise around SOGI individuals and issues in Vanuatu”. A Strategic Plan for 2020-2050 outlines its planned activities and partnerships and details recent developments in its governance including an elected board⁷⁴. VPride is very active in Vanuatu, delivering activities at the youth centre, participating in gender and human rights workshops, hosting and advising Embassy representatives on SOGI issues, and assisting with research. It also collaborates with the Ministry of Health around peer education on the topic of HIV prevention and sexual health⁷⁵. Much of VPride’s remit – and its core funding from the UN – remains focused on HIV but occasional small amounts of dedicated funding for specific activities allows more varied work. All of the Key Informants interviewed here were familiar with VPride and its work, despite its small size and limited resourcing.

Box 5. SEED as gender and SOGI capacity building for practitioners

Capacity building through training of SEED facilitators

Leading SEED discussions requires facilitators to have a deep understanding about the issues being covered. During facilitator training they are taken through the SEED modules and tools in detail as well as being given specific gender-transformative capacity training³⁰. As a result, the capacity of these individuals around gender and SOGI issues is significantly enhanced.

A number of members of the VPride Association have been trained as SEED facilitators. A Key Informant from VPride reported that SEED allowed them to “*build their capacity in facilitation, running workshops and also to be more confident of themselves*” (KI7) which they reported empowered them to represent the perspective of the SOGI community at external meetings. It also help them to articulate broader SOGI issues, beyond sexual health; “*We’ve been dealing with HIV for the past however many years, so [the content of] SEED was different, which was appealing*” (KI7).

A previous SEED intern at OiV described that they went from knowing “*nothing about gender*” to being able to lead discussions about the topic with community groups (KI8). They described how completing the SEED training had broadened their thinking and they demonstrated a high level of fluency and confidence talking about gender and SOGI issues including knowledge of the nuance around some issues which some other KIs demonstrated difficulty with, for example the use of correct pronouns for trans individuals.

Two KIs from NGOs expressed interest in learning more about SEED as a potential sensitisation tool, particularly for addressing the sensitive topic of SOGI issues. OiV has growing capacity around this and there is a planned learning review of SEED and intentions to publish guidance notes on a subset of the modules.

Social acceptance of SOGI

There were also some indications of a shift in social attitudes towards greater acceptance of SOGI individuals. A SOGI informant described that they felt like the situation had improved for them in openly living as a trans woman; *“Comparing Vanuatu now to 15 years ago, oh no I cannot [think about what it was like then]”* (Key Informant 7), but still felt that they were one of very few people who were openly ‘out’ in Vanuatu society.

The respondent at VCC similarly described a change in attitudes; *“In our church we have [a trans woman member], for example. Before - when [she] entered our church - everybody would be turning around, looking at [her], laughing and giggling. But [she] didn't stop coming to church. So now when [she] comes to church, [she] just walks past everybody and just sits where [she] wants to sit and everybody appreciates who it is. [She's] accepted here. We don't do all those kinds of things anymore, because we all know [she's] that kind of person and [she] chooses to be that kind of person, that's [her] right”*. This indicates there may be a shift to greater tolerance in some communities. However, the persistence of deep-seated attitudes and beliefs is demonstrated by the fact that the informant mis-gendered the trans individual during this account and by the suggestion that being SOGI is a choice. As the SOGI respondent explained; *“This is not a lifestyle choice. It's not like I decided today to be gay and transgender, it's not that”* (Key Informant 7). There were also some apparent shifts in attitudes in village communities (Box 6), but discrimination and persecution still persist and there is a need to be highly sensitive to the context during sensitisation efforts.

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One KI suggested that the traditional culture or *kastom* in Vanuatu was relatively more tolerant of diverse gender presentations, at least in the sphere of the home; *“If the chief or uncle of the family recognises [someone is] different - they use the word ‘special’ - then, they'll do the opposite-sex chores. But not in a public arena - it's just something they do at home”* (Key Informant 7). As they described it, according to VPride members; *“When we share amongst ourselves, most of [the members] say; ‘No it's not an issue when it comes to kastom but when it comes to church, that's another issue”* (Key Informant 7).

Box 6. SEED Case Study: SOGI sensitisation in village communities

Showground Village, Santo Island, is one of two villages visited by Oxfam to deliver SEED workshops in November 2018. The work was in collaboration with VPride who were aware of the presence of SOGI individuals in these villages who were suffering discrimination.

Attitudes seem to be changing, but slowly

Respondents described that attitudes towards SOGI people had begun to change since the SEED discussions. They described that, before the SEED workshops, verbal abuse of SOGI individuals was widespread and accepted by the community. After the workshops, there was reportedly greater understanding of the SOGI community and accounts including an individual who had attended SEED defending an SOGI individual against abuse which, it was suggested, would not have happened previously.

A female respondent, 50, reported that her and other members of her family used to

make fun of her SOGI nephew but that SEED had “*changed [my] whole view towards [SOGI] people. I came to realise that these people are special and have their rights too*”.

Another female respondent, 55, described that she and other members of the village had gained greater respect, understanding and acceptance of the SOGI community through SEED; “*Before, people would always make fun of SOGI people, but most people no longer do that and treat them with more respect*”. She said there was better awareness that SOGI people also deserve human rights.

Persistent challenges:

However, other accounts show that attitudes are not universally changed and that discrimination persists. Respondents said that there are members of the community who are still not accepting of SOGI individuals. One story was of an SOGI member of the community whose family had forcibly prevented their involvement in a same-sex relationship. One informant also stated that greater visibility of SOGI members of the community may have increased their exposure to targeting by harassers. This demonstrates the need for any work around these issues to be done with extreme sensitivity and the highest priority to safety of the participants.

SOGI and Christian values

The Christian church has significant influence in Vanuatu society and some informants saw the prevalence of conservative Christian values as a major reason that progress with SOGI equality remains limited; “*There’s still a lot of religious conservatism across the board so the level of acceptance of LGBT people varies wildly*” (Key Informant 5). It was reportedly the President of the Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC) which led a call to block a first attempt by VPride to register as an official association in 2013⁷⁶

However, as mentioned above, the Gender Coordinator from VCC, which coordinates work in and by the various Christian churches in Vanuatu, expressed a different stance. They stated that SOGI people are accepted by the church; “*We look at [SOGI] people as part of the community, part of society*”. The inclusion of SOGI people in the policies and projects of the churches has apparently been a discussion at VCC; “*We have talked about that in some of our meetings*”, but the decision had ultimately been to not to explicitly target SOGI individuals; “*We have come to understand that these kinds of people, we don’t want to take them as different, because we feel that if you start addressing them [as] different then that’s part of discrimination*”. The intention here is inclusivity and equal treatment. However, it does not acknowledge the disproportionately greater barriers and discrimination currently faced by SOGI members of society, such as the social exclusion described in the account of a trans woman attending church, above. The effect of such an approach may be considered similar to ‘gender blind’ policy or projects which do not acknowledge – and therefore do not address – the unequal challenges and needs of the different genders.

Representative of some of the more conservative values in Vanuatu, the Vanuatu National Council for Women (VNCW) stated that giving particular attention to SOGI individuals is not desirable because it diverts attention from other groups such as single mothers and widows. They felt that the discussion of SOGI rights was a result of the narrative of ‘gender’ which they stated

was a foreign concept which “[tries] to bring in other things” and “then everything can come in, even animals!”. Their stance was that policy should not focus on the broader concept of gender – which “is not our word” – but instead focus on “men and women’s equality” explicitly. However, these informants reported that they had not been invited to participate in the development of the NGEF and suggested that this may be because the DWA and others know that they hold this conservative stance.

An apparent perception that discussions of gender might create the context for a push towards legalising gay marriage was mentioned by some respondents as one of the barriers that had impacted the introduction of the NGEF; “The talk at the time was that we are trying to push for same-sex marriage. No; it’s not about [that], it’s more about recognising and acknowledging that we all have the same rights, we [all] deserve respect in our society” (Key Informant 7).

So far, SOGI issues are almost absent within the work of government ministries, including within projects and policies on gender and inclusivity. Even the Ministry of Health, which works with VPride on HIV and sexual health peer education apparently “...defines it as ‘alternative lifestyle’” (Key Informant 7). Again, however, perspectives seemed to vary and an informant from the Ministry of Education acknowledged that progress is needed; “We haven’t gone that far yet. But there are children within schools who are within that classification so that might be an area that’s worth exploring and how we can cater for that”.

Many informants implied that the progress to date with increasing the focus on gender equality was a significant achievement in the context, and that progress on SOGI issues constitutes a big next step; “There are no women in parliament even, so this [would be a huge next step]” (Key Informant 5).

INCLUSION IN THE POLICY PROCESS

VPride – which is the main representative voice for SOGI community in Vanuatu – have not been included in government consultations on the NGEF to date, despite making requests to comment on the draft policy when it was circulated to organisations; “I learnt from someone...that there is a draft going around and...I got the draft and I actually emailed the Director at that time to see if there was a possibility for LGBT to be addressed in the policy, but it was overlooked”. VPride also report not being invited by the government to any consultation workshops, although they ended up attending part of the NGEF review process in 2019 through links with OiV.

There has reportedly been some engagement by the Vanuatu government on the topic of SOGI inclusion in gender policy. For example, one Key Informant reported that at a public forum on women’s rights, a senior government official acknowledged that SOGI is an area where the Vanuatu government currently does not have any policy, that this is a gap leading to the exclusion of the SOGI community and that this should be an area for future policy development. The government is also a signatory to the Pacific Platform for Action (PPA) on Gender Equality and Women’s Human Rights. A consultation draft of this for 2018-2030⁷⁷ includes wording which incorporates SOGI individuals; “Women and girls, and men and boys, in all their diversity...” and “The promotion of the rights of women with diverse sexuality and gender identity...”⁷⁸.The

document is not yet finalised however and, during consultation, the Vanuatu government reportedly opposed stronger wording which explicitly mentioned trans and lesbian women⁷⁹. Any impacts of PPA in Vanuatu will depend how it is interpreted in national policy and programming. Discussions around the subject have been highly contentious, according to KIs, and balancing the push for inclusion of SOGI by some parties with the values of individuals and institutions with more conservative values remains a challenge.

Key Informants reported that there were a range of perspectives on SOGI within the government depending on personal values and beliefs. One Key Informant indicated that the Ministry for Youth and Sport had voiced support for inclusion of SOGI individuals in their work and there had been some promising interactions between VPride and the Ministry of Education. These are also the two Ministries which include mention of diverse sexualities and orientations in regulations; the Teaching Service Act 2013 and the National Youth Authority Bill. On the other hand, the values held by some senior decision-making staff in other departments were seen to present critical barriers to progress.

Perspectives and approaches also vary amongst NGOs. Oxfam in Vanuatu is the only international NGO to openly support VPride and the SOGI community. Some local NGOs openly provide support including Sista⁸⁰, Wan Smol Bag⁸¹ and Human Capacity Development International which supported VPride to develop its Strategic Plan 2020-2050⁸². Other international NGOs provide support more implicitly by, for example, including VPride members as participants in capacity-building workshops; VPride were present at UN Women's gender and humanitarian training in 2019, for example, and a trans member of VPride was included by Care International in their Young Women in Leadership programme.

Respondents from international NGOs described that efforts to work on SOGI issues will require a *"softly, softly, do no harm approach"* to avoid *"overstepping boundaries"* which could potentially lead to resistance from more conservative members of Vanuatu society, including within the government. Without appropriate sensitisation, there is also the risk that work with SOGI issues could lead to backlash or worsening of the situation for SOGI individuals in society, for example by bringing greater attention to their presence or seeming to divert attention from other groups (for example, see accounts in [Box 6](#))⁸³.

An illustration of the interest amongst NGOs to work on these issues, but the challenges of doing so, was described by one KI: a number of NGOs attended a sensitisation workshop hosted by VPride for organisations interested in working on SOGI issues. However, during the meeting, the VPride Executive Director was threatened with arrest for convening the session. When asked if they wanted to proceed with the workshop or cancel it to avoid the risk that it could lead to repercussions, NGO attendees reportedly voted to continue; *"They wanted to learn because [SOGI] is part of their mandate, part of their work"* (Key Informant 7). There is therefore potential support and capacity amongst NGOs to work on SOGI issues, but KIs stated that progress will need to be made sensitively and should recognise the norms and the values in the local context. Informants described that for this reason, many NGOs currently incorporate SOGI issues into their work and communication around gender protection, human rights and inclusivity.

The perspective of one NGO informant is that progress is possible but *"movement is very slow"* and *"there will be a lot of resistance"* (Key Informant 6). As another KI stated; *"The issue is not*

in the NGOs, it is in the all-male government of Vanuatu, who hold the power” (Key Informant 5). This extends to power over the actions of the DWA and others championing the NGEF and gender equality or LGBTQI+ rights.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) 2015-2019 and the second phase (NGEP 2) due to be implemented over the period of 2020-2024 are a significant positive step for gender equality in Vanuatu.

There was strong interest and support for the policy amongst most of the institutions interviewed in this research, and good alignment between many of their current programming priorities and internal gender policies and the NGEF strategic areas. Achievements such as the establishment of Gender Focal Points within a number of government ministries were amongst examples given of progress made with implementing the policy.

However, the prevalence of patriarchal norms and beliefs in Vanuatu society and the continued domination of men in positions of leadership and decision-making – including within the government – make the context for progress challenging. Successful implementation of the NGEF 2 will therefore critically rely on supporting capacity and infrastructure.

A fundamental requirement for effective implementation is a comprehensive implementation plan and a framework for Monitoring & Evaluation of progress against the policy indicators. These were lacking for the first phase of the NGEF but there were positive accounts from KIs that both are in development for the NGEF 2, including an intention to coordinate with NGOs to ‘map’ programming and encourage alignment of work across the strategic areas. Collaboration with NGOs can also bring in external gender expertise, such as on collection and analysis of suitable gender data for M&E, and can contribute to gender capacity within domestic institutions over time.

The establishment of GFPs in a number of government ministries was seen to be providing critical visibility and accountability for gender within the ministries’ work. However, further progress will rely on broader sensitisation about gender, particularly amongst senior decision-makers. This may need to be approached strategically, perhaps as part of a broader human rights agenda, to ensure buy-in in a context where gender is often a *tabu* subject. A couple of respondents reported that incorporating gender within a human rights framework made the issue more tolerable to people who might otherwise be resistant to the subject.

Dedicated time, resources and expertise are needed for effective implementation of the gender policy and other gender work. This was reportedly a challenge for the Department of Women’s Affairs which – despite it being proposed otherwise in the policy wording – was seen to have

been left with primary responsibility for both coordination and implementation during the first phase of the NGEF. The DWA receives insufficient funding and institutional support to lead on policy implementation. GFPs and others in gender coordination roles also found it difficult to find capacity to fulfil their gender responsibilities on top of the demands of their day jobs and reported a lack of systematic training or guidance in the roles. It was suggested that the DWA's efforts for the NGEF 2 should be focused on coordination whilst actual implementation should be delivered by other institutions, including NGOs. Explicit communication and promotion about the second phase of policy could improve awareness and attention given to the policy amongst institutions that should be involved in its implementation.

The exclusion of SOGI was seen as a gap in the NGEF. The subject of SOGI rights remains highly contentious in Vanuatu. There are some indications of shifting attitudes and increasing acceptance in certain spheres. However, conservative values – particularly associated with religion – and strongly embedded societal gender norms mean that members of the SOGI community continue to suffer human rights violations. In the absence of explicit mention in any other policy in Vanuatu, inclusion in a national policy – with wording similar to the PPA to which Vanuatu is a signatory, for example – would create the opportunity for Vanuatu to further its progress on SOGI rights in line with its endorsement of UN human rights resolutions. Some respondents suggested that, as for gender, incorporating SOGI rights under the topic of human rights was a way to foster greater tolerance for focus being given to the issue. Any work on SOGI needs to be done with careful sensitisation using appropriate tools and expertise, such as the SEED framework and trained facilitators, to avoid unintended negative consequences.

With the implementation of the NGEF 2 in 2020-2024, there is considerable potential for real progress to be made towards gender equality in Vanuatu. Insights from the first phase of the policy provide valuable lessons which will hopefully be applied to maximise the effectiveness of the next phase.

A summary of key findings and recommendations:

- Inclusion of a comprehensive implementation plan and a framework for Monitoring & Evaluation of progress against the policy indicators is fundamental.
- There is a significant need around the broader sensitisation about gender, particularly amongst senior decision-makers. Incorporating gender within a human rights framework can facilitate buy-in in a context where gender is often a *tabu* subject.
- Dedicated time, resources and expertise are needed for effective implementation of the gender policy and other gender work.
- Systematic training or guidance in the Gender Focal Points roles would be deemed beneficial in elevating and delivering on the intended outcome of that work.
- Recognizing the gap of SOGI inclusion, incorporating SOGI rights under the topic of human rights is a way to foster greater tolerance for focus being given to the issue.
- The collective programming and resources of NGOs and other development partners in Vanuatu constitutes a significant potential resource for implementing actions under the NGEF but needs effective coordination by the government.

- To ensure complementarity of various efforts by different actors, a mapping of gender work across Vanuatu will be a good value add to deliver on NGEF phase 2.
- Gender expertise are often initially external to the government but can be leveraged to build internal capacity. Projects and programs by development partners should therefore be designed with a clear technical skill transfer and handover.
- It will be key to reflect on the first NGEF insights and findings, in order to best inform the implantation of NGEF.

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NOTES

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