

GENDER AND LGBTQI+ POLICY AND PROGRAMMING IN VANUATU

Opportunities, challenges, capacity, and tools for change

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 in 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 aspect of gender equality should be included in the revised policy.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CDCCC	Community Disaster and Climate Change Committee
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	civil society organization
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)
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MJCS	Ministry of Justice and Community Services
NGEP	National Gender Equality Policy 2015–2019
NGEP 2	National Gender Equality Policy Phase 2 2020–2024
NGO	non-governmental organization
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+)
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 in 2019, and a second phase (NGEP 2) will be implemented for the period 2020–2024.

The aim of this research is to identify key factors contributing to successes or challenges in implementing the first phase of the policy by exploring the experiences, insights, and perspectives of individuals working on gender in Vanuatu. Insights on these factors can 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 in related work. Findings are based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in Vanuatu in February and March 2020.

Key themes that emerged from the research were the importance of institutional capacity and of awareness and attitudes around gender and LGBTQI+ topics among individuals in key institutions. Informants reported that the NGEP strategic areas were well aligned with the content of programming and internal gender policies of many institutions working on gender in Vanuatu. Coordination of the work itself, however, was perceived as lacking during the first phase of the policy. Critically, informants saw the need for an implementation plan and a monitoring and evaluation framework; both are apparently priorities in the development of the NGEP 2. There is also a reported intention by the DWA to better coordinate with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) to map ongoing gender work to the NGEP strategic areas.

A lack of dedicated time, resources, and expertise for the implementation of gender work under the NGEP were also identified as challenges, and overcoming these shortfalls is a priority for the NGEP 2. The Department of Women's Affairs, for example, which is responsible for developing the policy, has historically received limited funding and lacks institutional support and authority for policy implementation.

The establishment of gender focal points (GFPs) in some government ministries was seen as a positive step toward integrating gender into 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 among senior decision makers, and achieving such support is likely to require sensitization in the form of awareness raising and efforts to shift attitudes and behaviors.

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

The Gender-Just Social and Economic Empowerment Design (SEED) tool developed by Oxfam offers a resource that could be used to support implementation of the NGEP 2 and related programming. The focus here 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. 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 the value of building capacity around gender and SOGI among the staff involved in delivering programs.

The NGEP 2 for 2020–2024 offers considerable potential for making real progress toward gender equality in Vanuatu. Insights from the first phase of the policy provide valuable lessons that will hopefully be applied to maximize the effectiveness of the next phase.

1 INTRODUCTION

As in many countries, gender inequality is a persistent development challenge in Vanuatu. In 2016 the government introduced the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) to “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 2020–2024.

The successful implementation of the NGEP 2 depends on a number of factors. One key factor is the capacity of 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’s aims among individuals working in key institutions, including local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with gender-relevant programming and government ministries that have introduced gender-mainstreaming measures or plan to do so. To evaluate factors affecting the implementation of the NGEP to date and the prospects for progress in the next phase, it is critical to capture the insights of people who have experience working in related roles during the initial NGEP policy period.

RESEARCH AIMS

This research aims to capture the experiences, attitudes, and insights of individuals and institutions whose work will influence, and be influenced by, the NGEP and NGEP 2, and of the communities that will be the target of policy implementation activities. The capacity and perceptions of such individuals and groups have significant implications for the successful implementation of the policies and related programming, and for the possible inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+)—or sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI)—rights.^a

Information about community-level gender and SOGI dynamics in Vanuatu are illustrated through data collected at three sites where Oxfam has piloted the gender-mainstreaming Social and Economic Empowerment Design (SEED) tool (see Box 1). This information provides insights into the context in which gender and LGBTQI+ policy and programming are being implemented in Vanuatu, including some of the key challenges and opportunities. The SEED tool offers lessons that could help inform best practices for implementing actions under the NGEP and could be useful in working with communities to identify high-priority local challenges and to sensitize them about gender and SOGI.

This report is intended to complement the review of the NGEP led by the Department of Women’s Affairs toward the end of 2019, which focused on evaluating material impacts of the policy. By providing insights into what it is like to work on implementing the NGEP, this research is intended to 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.

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

2 METHODS

This report is based primarily 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 (FGDs). These sources involved two types of informants: 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 organizations 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 organizations 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 associated with the organizations shown in Table 1 were available for interviews. The sample provides a range of governmental and NGO 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 officials from 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 NGEF, who was unavailable during the period of data collection.

Table 1: Organizations providing key informant interviews for the research

Government	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. Interviewees provided an overview of ongoing gender work in their institutions, details of their awareness and knowledge of the NGEF and NGEF 2, observations on the 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 the Vanuatu National Council for Women (VNCW) was conducted in Bislama by Linda Kenni, who afterward relayed the information to Caitlin McCormack. In a couple of cases, brief follow-up meetings were arranged with respondents to clarify or add details to the first interview. Responses are anonymized in the report.

Data were also collected in three case study sites where OiV had piloted the SEED tool—a framework for gender mainstreaming and sensitization—to gather information about gender and SOGI dynamics, attitudes, and experiences at a community level and about the potential for using tools like SEED to shift these^c (Box 1). The three sites were chosen because they were 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 that is co-created by communities.

SEED consists of workshops that help participants 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 they are considered *tabu* (taboo or forbidden) topics.

SEED is intended to help people identify the issues within their own communities. Workshops are designed to “help them to unpack issues [and] identify hidden [causes].”² This sensitization is meant 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 that can inform programming by Oxfam in Vanuatu (OiV) and others.

During piloting, OiV identified the potential for SEED to be used as a gender and SOGI sensitization tool both in communities and among facilitators. It has piloted SEED in a number of village communities and used it to train facilitators from local NGOs. Case studies are included throughout this report.

FGDs and semi-structured KI interviews were conducted with members of village communities to explore their experiences with SEED activities, developments since SEED implementation, and perceived challenges for the community in the near future (Table 2). Responses were recorded on flipchart paper using a combination of facilitators’ notes and participants’ sticky notes. Owing 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, and facilitators used careful prompts to incorporate gender and SOGI issues. Details of the data collection appear in Table 2.

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

Aspect of data collection	Epule village, Efate Island	Mere Sauwia village, Nguna Island	Showground village, Santo Island
<i>Date of SEED piloting</i>	2016–2017	2018, with last visit in early 2019	November 2018
<i>Modules delivered in pilot</i>	Economic Activity Assessment Building Family Foundations Growing Community Connections Resilience	Economic Activity Assessment Building Family Foundations Growing Community Connections Resilience Paid Work Opportunities	Building Family Foundations Growing Community Connections
<i>Notes about pilot visits</i>	This first SEED pilot was led by an external consultant. A number of	This first SEED pilot was led by internal staff at Oxfam in Vanuatu.	This pilot was delivered on behalf of VPride in two villages, chosen

	challenges affected the community's experience of the workshops. ³ VPride members attended as facilitators.	VPride members attended some sessions as facilitators.	because of the presence of SOGI individuals. BFF and GCC modules were chosen to facilitate discussion about SOGI issues.
<i>Date of visit for this project</i>	February 7, 2020	February 13, 2020	March 17, 2020
<i>Description of FGDs for this project</i>	The briefing had ~15 women and 5 men. Few attendees remembered participating in SEED. The group was divided into two mixed-gender groups. One was led by a consultant with a scribe/translator; the other was led by a local consultant. Discussion and notes in Bislama were translated.	A local consultant led data collection with two assistants. The briefing had 5 women and 11 men; then the group split into four mixed groups who were 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?	A local consultant led data collection. The FGD had 8 women and 2 men. The questions were the same as for Mere Sauwia, but there was more probing for discussion of SOGI issues.
<i>Community KIs for this project</i>	Female, 42	Female, 60 Female, 63 Male, 20	Female, 50 Female, 55

Although initial plans called for gender-separated FGDs, men and women often arrived for the sessions at the same time, and the village chief at the first site, Epule, appeared reluctant to divide the group by gender.^d Researchers therefore decided to use mixed groups, and they replicated this methodology at subsequent sites. An advantage of this approach was that it allowed for observation of gender dynamics among respondents in semi-formal discussions. In Santo, specific efforts were made to contact SOGI respondents, but those individuals were apparently unavailable.

Two of the KIs from organizations had experienced the use of SEED as a sensitization tool for the training of facilitators. Interviews with these respondents included some questions exploring their insights on this experience.

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 searches and requests to key informants for relevant documents.

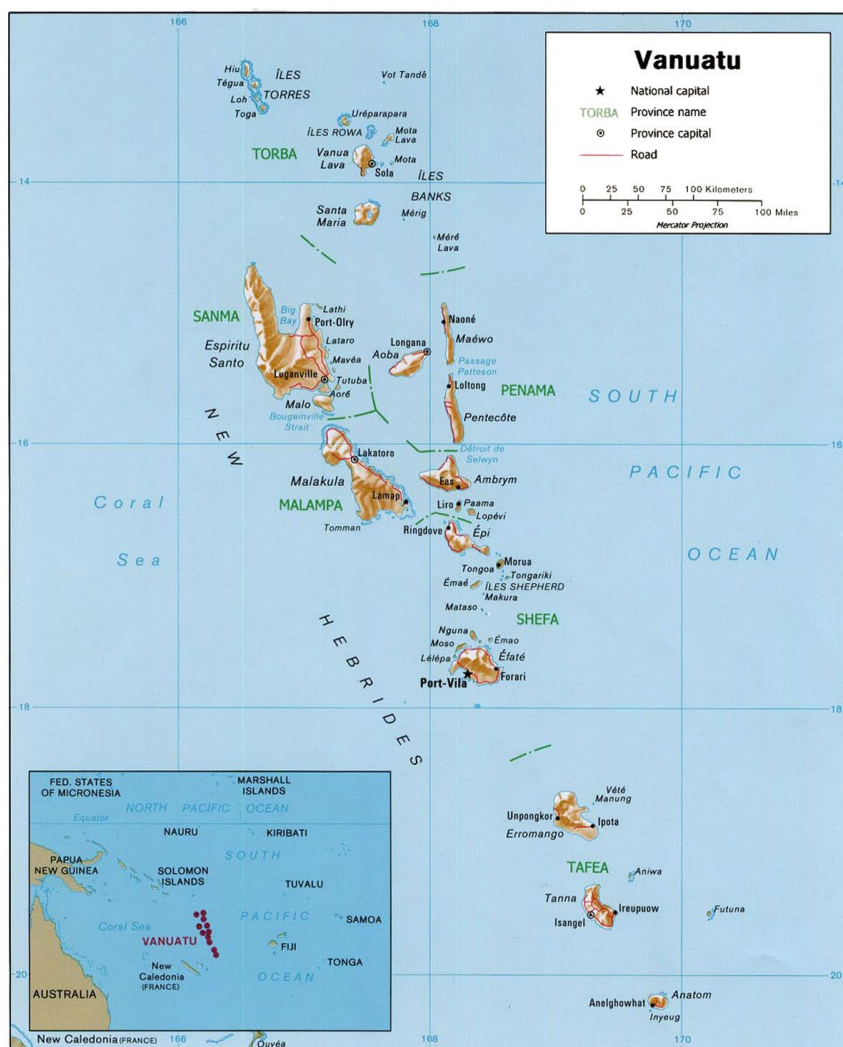
^d Accounts from collaborators at Oxfam in Vanuatu suggest that the topic of gender is a *tabu* subject in many communities in Vanuatu and that, in relation to work delivered by international NGOs, there is often a perception that "gender" refers to projects that target women and exclude men, with the 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 suggestion.

3 BACKGROUND

GEOGRAPHY OF VANUATU

Vanuatu, comprising 83 islands in the South Pacific Ocean (Figure 1), has a population of approximately 290,000 people.⁴ The majority of the population—74 percent—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 Other major sectors of the economy are tourism, which accounts for about 40 percent of GDP, and financial services.⁶

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 to developing-country status in December 2020.⁷ Compared with other least developed countries, Vanuatu has relatively high income per capita and life expectancy, its institutions and human capital are strong, and levels of well-being are high.⁸ However, Vanuatu is highly vulnerable to natural hazards, including cyclones and volcanic activity,⁹ which cause significant external shocks to the country's society and economy and present a critical challenge to development.

GENDER IN VANUATU

Gender inequality is a persistent development challenge for Vanuatu, as it is for many countries. In terms of the economy, women's average gross national income in Vanuatu is about \$1,200 lower than men's.¹⁰ Women occupy a smaller share of most types of formal employment, filling fewer than 40 percent of jobs across the private and public sectors.¹¹ A greater proportion of women than men are engaged in informal or unpaid work, with the result that women's incomes are less secure¹².

Inequality exists in education too. Expected years of schooling are slightly lower for girls than boys,¹³ and a greater proportion of women than men have never been to school. Although this gap is closing in younger generations, women still have lower rates than men do of secondary education attainment (25.3 percent versus 27.4 percent) and tertiary education attainment (3.3 percent versus 4.5 percent).¹⁴

Maternal mortality in Vanuatu is slightly higher than the average for Pacific small island states, at 72 per 100,000.¹⁵ Although teenage pregnancy rates have fallen significantly in the past 20 years,¹⁶ they remain higher than the global average, at 49 births per 1,000 women aged 15–19.¹⁷

A particular issue for gender equality in Vanuatu is the 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 percent).¹⁸ Strong traditional cultural norms—known as *kastom* in Vanuatu—as well as patriarchal values introduced through Christianity and colonial power structures¹⁹ dictate that leadership roles are the domain of men and that women should fulfill supportive roles. As a consequence, there are currently no female members of Parliament, and women account for only 7 out of the 48 director and director general positions in the Vanuatu government.²⁰

Gender-based violence is also a critical issue in Vanuatu. A 2011 report by the Vanuatu Women's Centre, which surveyed 3,750 women across Vanuatu, found that 60 percent of women who had ever been in a relationship had experienced either physical or sexual abuse by a partner, and more than two in three had experienced emotional abuse.²¹

There has been some progress on addressing these issues. For example, the proportion of women in wage 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 on the issue of gender-based violence.

Vanuatu has signed the international Convention to Eliminate 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 launched in 2016. It lapsed in 2019, and a second phase—the National Gender Equality Policy 2020–2024 (NGEP 2)—will replace it.

In preparation for this next phase, the Vanuatu government's Department of Women's Affairs (DWA) engaged in a comprehensive review of the NGEP at the end of 2019. Surveys and interviews with stakeholders from the provincial to the 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 among 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 implementing gender policy and work in Vanuatu.

SOGI INCLUSION

A specific focus in this research is on the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+)—or sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI)—issues within policy and programming in Vanuatu.

Internationally, there is an increasing focus on equality for SOGI people, and in recent years the United Nations (UN) has made several formal declarations on the topic. In 2008 the UN General Assembly made a statement in support of recognizing 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 member 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.²² Additionally, during a UN Universal Periodic Review^e in 2019, Vanuatu 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.”²³ Vanuatu decriminalized same-sex sexual conduct in 2007,²⁴ 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 sentence.²⁵

However, although the Vanuatu 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).²⁶ There are almost no legal protections against discrimination toward SOGI persons in employment, education, health care, housing, and the provision of goods and services. The only mentions to date are in the Teaching Service Act 2013, which forbids the Vanuatu Teaching Service Commission from discriminating on the basis of “sexual preference” in employment,²⁷ and in the National Youth Authority Act, which includes “those . . . of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity” in its definition of youth.²⁸

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

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 the sex-disaggregated data collected by many NGOs do not accurately capture people of diverse genders or any information about sexuality.²⁹ Some indicative numbers from VPride, a charitable organization working with SOGI communities in Vanuatu, show that across three of Vanuatu’s islands—Efate, Malakua, and Santo—there are at least 400 transgender individuals, 100 gay and 100 lesbian individuals, and 200 gender-nonconforming individuals.³⁰ 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 such.³¹

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 a dedicated SOGI policy in the first iteration of the policy, the new phase of the NGEP offers a place to address it as a cross-cutting issue. SOGI equality can be seen as related to gender equality because discrimination against SOGI individuals is often rooted in societal norms about gender, and many of the barriers and challenges faced are similar.³² The NGEP offers the opportunity to address the topic within an existing framework, without the need for an additional policy or institutional capacity.

^e This is 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 work is underway to establish one.

NATIONAL GENDER EQUALITY POLICY 2015–2019

The National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) was introduced in 2016, after a long process of development and consultation (Box 2). The development of the policy was led by the Department of Women’s Affairs (DWA) within the Ministry of Justice and Community Services (MJsCs), and overall responsibility for the policy lies with the DWA. The policy document³³ was drafted by an independent consultant from Australia.

Box 2: Timeline of the development and implementation of the National Gender Equality Policy 2015-19 in Vanuatu³⁴

2014: The DWA starts the process of developing the NGEP, building on consultations conducted as part of a gender mapping in 2013 and drawing on input from provincial and national governments, NGOs, and development partners.

July 2015: The Council of Ministers endorses the NGEP³⁵, and the DWA is tasked with conducting a review of progress toward the end of the policy period in late 2019.

2016: NGEP launched³⁶.

October–November 2019: DWA leads a review of NGEP comprising the following:

Provincial review: A consultation team of agency heads and technical officers from the government and NGOs conduct consultations in 37 communities throughout the provinces using the Most Significant Change technique⁹ to evaluate the impacts of the NGEP.

Review workshop: The DWA and the Ministry of Justice and Community Services hold a two-day workshop with NGOs and CSOs to review progress resulting from the NGEP.

November 2019: Two weeks after the review workshop, a summary of the outcomes of the provincial review and the review workshop is presented to participants at a validation workshop, along with a proposed framework for the NGEP 2.

December 2019: The planning and drafting of NGEP 2 take place.

March 2020: The DWA publishes a report on the review of NGEP.³⁷ Work proceeds on finalizing the policy document and developing a monitoring and evaluation framework and implementation plan.

June 2020: Scheduled introduction of the NGEP 2 2020–2024.

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
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.”³⁸ For each strategic area, the plan gives a shortlist of key strategies and outlines indicators. It summarizes a plan for implementation, review, and reporting, and it mentions 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 NGEP. The review process comprised surveys of key stakeholders from the 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

⁹ The Most Significant Change technique involves collecting 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.

organizations discussed their perspectives on progress with the NGEF in Vanuatu.^h The outcomes of the surveys and workshop were analyzed by the same independent consultant who wrote the NGEF and were presented 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 Program, but a 2006 review led by the DWA concluded that implementation had been limited owing to 21 key barriers, including the following:

- lack of government resources and commitment
- men’s dominance in Parliament and political parties
- traditional beliefs that women have no place as leaders
- the belief that customary laws do not need changing
- continued belief in the inferiority of women by women as well as by men
- the idea that promoting women’s rights is incompatible with Christian principles
- the endemic nature of gender-based violence
- the ending of the Gender Equity Task Force created to oversee the policy
- the challenging environment created by the lack of any supporting policies for the policy³⁹

None of the key informants (KIs) interviewed in this study mentioned the Gender Equity Policy; they either reported that there had been no previous policies on gender equality or suggested that the most relevant policy was the Family Protection Act 2008,⁴⁰ which provides legal protection to victims of domestic violence and punishment for perpetrators. Its introduction after more than eight years of consultation was a milestone in gender equality policy in Vanuatu, yet implementation, even after more than a decade, has remained slow.⁴¹

KIs cited the Constitution of Vanuatu 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”⁴² (emphasis added). This article also allows for laws and actions “for the special benefit, welfare, protection or advancement of females.” However, KIs regarded this as a relatively weak inclusion of gender that 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 has not yet achieved.⁴³

In 2016 Vanuatu also introduced the **Vanuatu National Sustainable Development Plan 2016–2030** (NSDP).⁴⁴ Although this plan was published after the introduction of the NGEF, it was in force during the implementation of both the NGEF and the NGEF 2. It includes a commitment in Society Goal 4 to pursue “an inclusive society . . . where the rights of all Ni-Vanuatu including women . . . are supported, protected and promoted in our legislation and institutions”⁴⁵ and specifies the implementation of gender-responsive planning and budgeting processes, among several other objectives related to gender. The NGEF 2 is intended to be aligned and linked to the strategic objectives of the NSDP and other national development processes.⁴⁶

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

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, and signatory countries are required to incorporate the convention into domestic legislation. In 2014 Vanuatu submitted its combined fourth and fifth progress reports 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 NGEF.⁴⁷

Vanuatu has also signed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), which enshrines a global commitment to equal rights and opportunities for women,⁴⁸ and a number of KIs mentioned this document as a driver for the creation of the NGEF. A plan for implementing the BPfA in Vanuatu was introduced in 1996. Among the requirements is that Vanuatu should establish institutional mechanisms for advancing gender equality such as robust laws and policies, national gender equality action plans and gender-responsive budgeting.⁴⁹ In 2015 countries reported on their progress on platform plans at Beijing+20; 2020 marks Beijing+25, when progress is being reviewed 25 years after adoption. The period of the NGEF coincides with this reporting, and the Vanuatu government cites the policy as an important achievement over the five years since Beijing +20.⁵⁰

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 women.⁵¹ Vanuatu endorsed the recent Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women’s Human Rights for 2018–2030. Vanuatu has also adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 5 on gender equality.⁵²

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 who, what, and where of gender work, although a general map of the activities of NGOs, development partners, and government bodies is in development.⁵³

The KIs interviewed often work in collaboration with other organizations and were therefore able—in the absence of time to interview all organizations directly—to provide an overview of the current programs and work areas of the major organizations working on gender in Vanuatu.

A snapshot of gender work by NGOs, as reported by KIs, is given in Table 3, categorized under the NGEF’s four strategic areas. 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.

Table 3: Snapshot of gender-focused projects currently being delivered by NGOs in Vanuatu

NGEF strategic area	NGO programs
<i>Reducing domestic and gender-based violence</i>	<p>World Vision: REACH (Relationship Education about Choices for Healing), including men’s behavior 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: theater to deliver awareness on gender-based violence</p>
<i>Enhancing women’s economic empowerment</i>	<p>Care International: Leftemap Sista; Gender Equality Together (helping women establish and expand income sources)</p>

	<p>ActionAid: Women I Tok Tok Tugeta group (enhancing women’s agency, leadership, and collective working, including diversifying income sources)</p> <p>UN Women: Markets for Change (providing market facilities for women vendors)</p>
<i>Promoting women’s leadership and equal political participation</i>	<p>Oxfam: Vot Woman (funding national women’s leadership conference and forum); Governance, Leadership and Accountability Program; Gender Justice, Youth and Livelihoods program (facilitating networks for participating in government policy consultations)</p> <p>Care International: Young Women in Leadership program; Gender Equality Together program; 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>
<i>Building a foundation for gender mainstreaming</i>	<p>Care International: Gender Equality Together Gender Cohort</p> <p>Vanuatu Christian Council: work within the church around integrating gender</p>
<i>Resilience*</i>	<p>Care International: Disaster Ready program</p> <p>Vanuatu Women’s Centre: work to prevent and respond to gender-based violence following emergencies</p> <p>ActionAid: Women-Led Climate Resilience and Adaptation⁵⁴</p>
<i>LGBTQI+/SOGI issues**</i>	<p>VPride: education, support and advocacy on LGBTQI+/SOGI rights and HIV prevention</p> <p>Wan Smolbag: runs youth centers and educational activities including theatre on social issues including health, also works closely with VPride</p> <p>Oxfam: institutional support and capacity building for VPride members</p> <p>Care International: inclusion and capacity building for VPride members</p> <p>Sista: strategic support to VPride; online information and campaigning on gender and LGBTQI+/SOGI rights in Vanuatu</p>
<p>Source: 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>Note: This list is an incomplete overview of ongoing work on gender equality by NGOs. 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 NGEF 2.</p> <p>*New strategic area added after review of policy in November 2019.</p> <p>**Not a strategic area of the NGEF but a focus of this project.</p>	

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 toward gender in Vanuatu; awareness of the policy; implementation, monitoring, and evaluation; coordination; government implementation capacity; and gender infrastructure within institutions.

ATTITUDES TOWARD 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 (Christianityⁱ) constitute the influential gate-keeping institutions that shape the context for any potential progress on gender equality. Respondents described both institutions as characterized 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 are not meant for leadership. Vanuatu currently has no female members of Parliament, and the church, despite some progress on women's involvement in decision making, remains male dominated.

This predominance of men in positions of power is likely to create resistance to progress on gender. As one KI from a government ministry stated, to make progress on gender, "You need that support, and if you don't have superiors who are gender sensitive, it can be very tricky" (Key Informant 1). The Ministry of Justice and Community Services identifies lack of political will as a significant challenge to progress on gender equality⁵⁵ and one reason why there has been relatively little tangible implementation of the Family Protection Act even though it was introduced more than 10 years ago.⁵⁶

Consequently, the introduction of the NGEF is a significant step toward advancing gender equality in Vanuatu. The document itself is strong on the conceptualization 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 been lacking. As one KI describes it, it legitimizes 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 3: 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 have taken more responsibility for child care 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.

ⁱ Other religions are practiced in Vanuatu, but Christianity is the dominant religion.

- One single mother had been empowered to participate in a seasonal worker program. Her parents helped with child care, and she could reimburse them.
- A trans or nonbinary 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 had become more open minded: “We realize that there are other ways to do things. We have thought about things we’ve never thought about before.” She described a change in attitudes toward people with disabilities and other marginalized members of the community and said she had learned that it is not just the traditional family structure that is stable. “Other families can also be stable,”^j she said.

Persistent challenges and lessons

- Participants described ongoing conflicts between men and women over household finances and over the fact that care and domestic work are still predominantly done by women.
- However, many women in the FGDs perceived that the current division of roles and power between men and women are appropriate and do not need changing.
- Communities need follow-up visits to reinforce learning, 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 recognized.

AWARENESS OF THE POLICY

Familiarity with the NGEF varied among the respondents interviewed, which was reportedly indicative of awareness of the policy within their institutions 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 content and requirements of the policy make it a challenge to deliver on 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 on 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 organization demonstrated a lack of awareness of the policy implementation period: “The first one was a four-year policy, or three or two—I forgot” and “I think the time frame of the policy should be a bit longer—four or five years” (key informant 2). This response implies that ongoing alignment with the policy is not yet a priority for this organization.

As one informant stated it may take time for the NGEF, as one of the first national gender equality policies, to be incorporated into the work of organizations: “With this one, because it’s the first government policy, I don’t know whether a lot of organizations have picked up the strategic objectives of [the] policy and implemented them” (key informant 2). A ministry informant stated that a key step 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).

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

^j SEED discussions in the Building Family Foundations module include a flash-card activity that depicts same-sex couples and trans or nonbinary individuals as part of examples of alternative family structures.

IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING, AND EVALUATION

One key informant from the Ministry of Education believed that the policy made clear what progress on the key strategies should entail: “It is very clear what needed to be implemented” (key informant 1).

Several other key informants, however, reported that they were not aware of any implementation plan and suggested that this lack of communication had been a significant factor in preventing the policy from being implemented as extensively as it might otherwise have been.

There was also, according to KIs, no monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework, making it challenging to assess progress with implementation.⁵⁷ “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 government ministries observed no 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 approach provides valuable insights into how people experience policy implementation, but it is less reliable for measuring progress against quantitative indicators. The review itself now provides some evidence against which 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, the NGEF 2 will include a comprehensive implementation plan and M&E framework, which they saw as key to improving progress toward gender equality objectives.

It was not clear whether the current collection and availability of gender data were sufficient for monitoring progress. At a minimum data must be disaggregated by sex, which the NGEF states is a “necessary part of gender analysis.”⁵⁸ 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 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 we reach through our programs, we would be able to provide that data” (key informant 5). As one informant said, there was a gender monograph in Vanuatu’s 2009 census,⁵⁹ but in the 2016 mini-census the only data that were disaggregated by sex concerned access to education, while responses on all other topics were recorded at the level of the household. No specific data are 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 be used effectively once they are collated. Informants perceived a critical lack of expertise in analysis of gender data, both in the government and in NGOs: “Analysis has been the real issue because capacity doesn’t exist to analyze this kind of data” (key informant 6).

Sex-disaggregated data are fundamental to measuring the impacts of gender work, but they constitute a relatively basic measure. They capture the presence of men and women during project activities without necessarily showing longer-term impacts for gender equality (see Box 4). One informant reported that their institution also collects further evidence to look at “actual benefits in terms of impacts, for example on women’s livelihoods or girls in [education]” (key informant 3).

Box 2: SEED case study: The need for ongoing implementation and M&E

In 2018 OIV visited Mere Sauwia village, Nguna Island, to deliver SEED workshops and made occasional follow-up visits in 2019.

Hints of SEED success

- Participants reported that the incidence of violence in the community 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 showed that the seriousness of violence against women was a key issue that people—including the village chief—took from the discussions.
- Community members saw an increase in participation in the seasonal worker program^k as 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 nonbinary SEED facilitator during the course of the workshop sessions.

Persistent challenges and the need for ongoing implementation and monitoring

- Despite improvements in reducing violence, the community reported that incidents still occur and that more work is needed.
- Follow-up visits were seen as critical to reinforce learning. 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 around gender—require ongoing implementation action and M&E that goes beyond collection of sex-disaggregated attendance data.

COORDINATION

Key informants suggested that there is considerable potential to improve implementation of the policy by better coordinating 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 observations made during fieldwork, there is significant capacity around gender programming in Vanuatu in terms of expertise and ongoing work within NGOs and development partners (see Table 3). Given resource restrictions faced by the DWA, discussed further below, harnessing this existing capacity could be invaluable in implementing the NGEF.

Key informants suggested that explicit coordination of NGO work across the NGEF strategic areas—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).

Currently, however, there is a lack of information on exactly what gender work the government, NGOs, and development partner agencies are implementing.⁶⁰ In 2013 the World Bank mapped gender work in the areas of economic empowerment, political engagement, and gender-based violence,⁶¹ and one informant reported current work by VANGO⁶² 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, the DWA recognizes the challenge of better coordinating agencies’ work and is planning measures to address this challenge in the NGEF 2. KIs stated that the DWA intends to create an

^k This is a program of the Australian government in which workers from Vanuatu and elsewhere travel to Australia to fill seasonal employment gaps in the agricultural (for example, fruit picking) and accommodation sectors.

implementation plan that 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 on gender are likely to fit within them without much need for adjustment. There also seem to be some efforts to coordinate and collaborate on programming. For example, Care International reported designing their resilience work to be deliberately complementary to Oxfam's approach, and there is government-instigated geographic coordination on work with Community Disaster and Climate Change Committees (CDCCCs), which integrate gender through a minimum requirement for female representation (see Box 5). The CDCCCs 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.

However, matching agencies' programming with the NGEF strategic areas presents a chicken-and-egg challenge, as one key informant described it. NGO projects are strongly dependent on donor priorities, which may or may not match the policy's 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 organizations. 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.

Informants acknowledged that the DWA faces capacity and resourcing challenges (explored further below), and one 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."⁶³ 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 coordinating and implementing the NGEF has tended to fall to the DWA. They noted that the DWA was challenged in its ability to take on this responsibility owing to insufficient funding. In 2015 the DWA budget comprised just 0.17 percent of the national budget, and in 2019 this share dropped to 0.11 percent. In addition, this budget was allocated for staffing and operational costs; there was no specific budget for programming or for implementation of the NGEF.⁶⁴ 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."⁶⁵

Encouragingly, in 2019 the DWA received funding of NZ\$1 million from the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade for staffing and programming.⁶⁶ However, the funding appears to be intended primarily for implementation of work related to the Pacific-wide Partnership to End Violence Against Women and Girls program.⁶⁷ 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 the 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 the DWA staff—including one senior staff member—were currently or imminently away on scholarship placements, while the DWA's women's economic empowerment officer position has been vacant since 2017.⁶⁸ This situation leaves the department with a limited number of officers to carry out work.

There was also perceived to be a shortage of expertise on policy implementation within the DWA. The DWA itself identifies the need for more expertise in the areas of implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and

gender mainstreaming.⁶⁹ The NGEF wording itself acknowledges that the DWA “did not have the technical . . . capacity” to take the lead on implementing actions under the policy⁷⁰.

External agencies provide some technical support. 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 works closely with the DWA and provides expertise and guidance where needed. Care also provides capacity building to a Gender Cohort, which has included key technical officers from government, NGOs, and other organizations.

As discussed in the previous section, the collective programming and resources of NGOs and other development agencies in Vanuatu constitute a significant potential resource for implementing actions under the NGEF, but the government must effectively coordinate them to ensure alignment with, and across, the four strategic areas of the NGEF.

These considerations were reportedly highlighted during the review of the NGEF, and KIs stated that the government seemed to intend the DWA to focus primarily on the role of coordination in the NGEF 2.

GENDER INFRASTRUCTURE WITHIN INSTITUTIONS

Progress on implementing the NGEF, the NGEF 2, and 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 Resources.⁷¹ The GFPs are responsible for overseeing the integration of gender into the work and operations of the ministries. Informants from the Ministry of Climate Change and the Ministry of Education perceived the GFPs as valuable focal contacts who can provide accountability for progress on gender and facilitate the integration of gender into the internal workings of the ministries and the policies they implement. A similar role is played 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 as contributing to greater attention to 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, one NGO informant saw such gender mainstreaming 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 lack of technical capacity or specific gender expertise among those appointed as GFPs remains a challenge. KIs reported that GFP roles were allocated mostly 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 in one of the ministries reported not receiving specific training after being appointed to the role (although they had inherited the role from a predecessor). This KI independently accessed training through Care International’s Gender Cohort program, 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 believed 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.” This person described similarly building expertise with the support of an NGO. UN Women had paid for the KI 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, who perform this role on top of their existing day jobs. Informants reported finding it difficult to make time for both, especially when

there are no additional resources for GFP duties.¹ This is particularly true when the roles and responsibilities are novel and impose a learning curve: “[Gender is] new; we’re finding our way around and having existing roles as permanent officers which are also demanding” (key informant 1). The ministry GFP and the VCC gender coordinator both stated that they are also responsible for work on disability and child protection, and this broad remit meant their time was stretched.

KIs also noted that support and buy-in from other colleagues are critical to advance gender work. The informant from the Ministry of Education said that their predominantly male senior colleagues were relatively unaware of gender inequality and suggested there is a critical need for broader sensitization, awareness raising, and capacity building around gender among 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 behavioral change and acceptance” (key informant 1). They said that this sensitization would have to be done carefully, 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). Similarly, the respondent from VCC reported that to get support from male colleagues in leadership positions, they disguised discussions of gender, embedding them within the theme of human rights: “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, the VCC KI also said 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 NGEP, the Ministry of Education and Training developed its own Gender Equity in Education Policy (GEEP), which was introduced in 2018. This was “a big step forward, but also at the time a big task” (key informant 1). The KI believes that implementation of the policy has been limited so far because of inadequate time and resources and a lack of oversight to provide accountability. The informant also noted that the topic of gender is new within the ministry, and a lack of expertise or prior experience with working on gender has been a challenge. Much of the work on the GEEP has reportedly relied on financial and technical support from the Vanuatu Education Support Program funded by the Australian government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Gender expertise therefore often initially comes from outside, though it can help build internal capacity. As an informant in the Ministry of Climate Change stated, gender specialists provided by project partners can “help build [government] capacity so they’ll have the knowledge of, or eye for, gender issues when implementing [future] projects.”

Box 5: 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 (CDCCCs).

CDCCCs 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 responses to climate change and natural hazards⁷².

One-third of committee leaders are required to be women. Informants report that this mandate has successfully led to increased representation of women in decision making: “That was something that came out in the [NGEP] consultation—CDCCCs are helping in terms of leadership opportunities” (key informant 3).

One informant reported that women’s leadership in CDCCCs had knock-on positive impacts for gender equality and women’s leadership more broadly: “CDCCCs are relatively accessible for women to become leaders 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” (key informant 5).

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.

However, a participation quota does not eliminate the challenges women face in applying for these positions, including their own internalized beliefs that women are not suited to leadership. Sensitization tools such as SEED may offer a means to address this; one woman who attended SEED workshops in Mere Sauwia, Nguna island (see Box 6) and subsequently became a CDCCC leader told a member of Oxfam staff that she had pursued the role because SEED had raised her awareness of and confidence in her right to participate in decision-making forums.

Although the Ministry of Climate Change has no specific internal gender policy, gender is included as a cross-cutting issue in Vanuatu's Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2016–2030.⁷³ This inclusion is a positive step, but according to one informant a review of this policy concluded that so far the inclusion of gender was general and lacked detail on 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, mainly in relation to the design and delivery of projects, which the ministry often does in partnership with external partners and donors. For example, inclusion of 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 CDCCCs—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 5).

The VCC also has its own Gender Equality Policy, which was introduced in 2013, pre-dating the NGEF. The policy was updated in 2017, and the strategic areas were revised to integrate with those of the NGEF. As the VCC KI explained, “We want to work closely with the government. . . . We want to implement the policies of the government. . . . [By including the NGEF 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 you are obliged to carry out some of the things in the gender policy.” The written policies, they said, legitimized the topic of gender as a point of discussion with decision makers within their institutions.

5 SOGI AND THE NGEF

One gap in the NGEF, according to some key informants, was the failure to include SOGI issues. Currently SOGI is not explicitly mentioned in any policy in Vanuatu. The only place where inclusion might be understood, key informants suggested, is in the National Sustainable Development Plan 2016–2030, which mentions “women, youth, the elderly and vulnerable groups,”⁷⁴ and the Vanuatu Constitution, which mentions “protection or advancement of females. . . [and] members of under-privileged groups”⁷⁵ (emphasis added). Supporting this interpretation, a video presentation by the Vanuatu delegation to the UN during its Universal Periodic Review featured images of VPride, the only SOGI organization in Vanuatu, during the mention of “vulnerable groups.”⁷⁶

This wording is open to interpretation, but given the generally limited acknowledgment 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 said, “[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.”⁷⁷ The diversity and groups defined here are limited to subgroups of girls and women. As one informant stated, “The NGEF is quiet on [SOGI]” (key informant 3).

Even if one interprets the NGEF to include SOGI, one KI saw the fact that it is “hidden” within the category of vulnerable groups as creating an unhelpfully negative and narrow picture of the SOGI community. 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 cracks 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-nonconforming 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 informant described one example of the implications of this shortcoming: 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 place.⁷⁸ “These people exist and they are suffering—ignoring them is a human rights issue” (key informant 4). In the absence of a specific policy on SOGI issues, the NGEF was seen as the most likely and relevant place to address them.

SOGI RIGHTS IN VANUATU

There are some positive signs for SOGI rights in Vanuatu. First, in contrast to several other countries in the region, Vanuatu decriminalized same-sex sexual conduct in 2007. Furthermore, the existence of VPride and its legal registration as an official charitable organization in 2017 constitute significant achievements in the context of the continued strong influence of conservative Christian principles in Vanuatu society.⁷⁹ Founded in 2007, VPride originated as a peer education program delivered by Wan Smolbag, an NGO focusing on HIV and sexual health. VPride now describes its remit as “to help educate, advocate, and mobilize around diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and sex characteristics” in Vanuatu⁸⁰. A strategic plan for 2020–2050 outlines the organization’s planned activities and partnerships and details recent developments in its governance, including the introduction of an elected board.⁸¹ VPride is active in Vanuatu, delivering activities at the youth center, 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 in offering peer education on HIV prevention and sexual health.⁸² 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 allow more varied work. All of the key informants interviewed here were familiar with VPride and its work, despite its small size and limited resources.

Box 6: Capacity building through training of SEED facilitators

To lead SEED discussions, facilitators must have a deep understanding of 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 training.⁸³ The training significantly enhances these individuals’ capacity around gender and SOGI issues.

A number of members of VPride have been trained as SEED facilitators. A key informant from VPride reported that SEED allowed trained members to “build their capacity in facilitation [and] running workshops and also to be more confident of themselves” (key informant 7), empowering them to represent the perspective of the SOGI community at external meetings. It also helped them 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” (key informant 7).

A previous SEED intern at OiV described going from knowing “nothing about gender” to being able to lead discussions on the topic with community groups (key informant 8). They described how completing the SEED training had broadened their thinking. They also demonstrated a high level of fluency and confidence talking about gender and SOGI issues, including nuances around issues with which some other KIs had difficulty, such as the correct use of pronouns for trans individuals.

Two KIs from NGOs expressed interest in learning more about SEED as a potential sensitization tool, particularly for addressing SOGI issues. OiV has growing capacity in this area and has plans to conduct a learning review of SEED and to publish guidance notes on a subset of the modules.

Social acceptance of SOGI

There have been some indications of a shift in social attitudes toward greater acceptance of SOGI individuals. A SOGI informant believed the situation had improved for her as she could live openly 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). She still believed she was one of very few people who were openly out in Vanuatu society.

The respondent at VCC described a similar 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.” Although this anecdote suggests that tolerance may be increasing in some communities, the persistence of deep-seated attitudes and beliefs is demonstrated by the fact that the informant misgendered the trans individual during this account and suggested 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 7), but discrimination and persecution persist, and there is a need to be highly sensitive to context during sensitization efforts.

One KI suggested that traditional culture or *kastom* in Vanuatu is relatively tolerant of diverse gender presentations, at least in the sphere of the home: “If the chief or uncle of the family recognizes [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). 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 7: SEED case study: SOGI sensitization in village communities

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

Attitudes seem to be changing, but slowly

Respondents reported that attitudes toward SOGI people began to change after the SEED workshops. Before the workshops, verbal abuse of SOGI individuals had been widespread and accepted by the community. After the workshops, there was reportedly greater understanding of the SOGI community. According to one account, an individual who had attended SEED defended an SOGI individual against abuse—an occurrence, it was suggested, that would not have happened previously.

A female respondent, 50, reported that she and others in her family used to make fun of her SOGI nephew but that SEED had “changed [my] whole view toward [SOGI] people. I came to realize that these people are special and have their rights too.”

Another female respondent, 55, said 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

Other accounts show that attitudes are not universally changed and that discrimination persists. Respondents said that some members of the community still do not accept SOGI individuals. One story concerned an SOGI member of the community whose family had forcibly prevented their involvement in a same-sex relationship. An informant also stated that greater visibility of SOGI members of the community may have increased their exposure to targeting by harassers. Accordingly, any work around these issues must be conducted with extreme sensitivity and the highest priority given to the safety of 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 for the limited progress on SOGI equality: “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) who led a call to block VPride’s first attempt to register as an official association in 2013.⁸⁴

However, as already mentioned, 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 topic of discussion at VCC: “We have talked about that in some of our meetings.” Ultimately, however, the VCC decided 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.” Here the VCC intends to express support for inclusivity and equal treatment, but it does not acknowledge the disproportionate barriers and discrimination 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 is similar to “gender-blind” policies or projects that do not acknowledge—and therefore do not address—the unequal challenges and needs of the different genders.

Informants from the Vanuatu National Council for Women (VNCW) were representative of more conservative values in Vanuatu. They 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 believed that the discussion of SOGI rights was a result of the narrative of “gender,” which they stated was a foreign concept that “[tries] to bring in other things” and “then everything can come in, even animals!” They argued 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. These informants reported that they had not been invited to participate in the development of the NGEF, suggesting that they may have been excluded because the DWA and others are aware of their conservative stance.

Some respondents mentioned that one barrier affecting the introduction of the NGEF was an apparent perception that discussions of gender might create the context for a push toward legalizing gay marriage: “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 recognizing 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 from the work of government ministries, including in 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 an ‘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 on increasing the focus on gender equality was a significant achievement in the context of Vanuatu, and that progress on SOGI issues would constitute 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—the main representative voice for the SOGI community in Vanuatu—has not been included in government consultations on the NGEF to date, despite asking to comment on the draft policy when it was circulated to organizations: “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 reported 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.

The Vanuatu government has reportedly undertaken some engagement 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 has no policy, that this gap leads 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 on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights (PPA). A consultation draft of the platform for 2018–2030 includes wording that incorporates SOGI individuals, such as “women and girls, and men and boys, in all their diversity”⁸⁵ and “the promotion of the rights of women with diverse sexuality and gender identity.”⁸⁶ The document is not yet finalized, however, and during consultation the Vanuatu government reportedly opposed stronger wording that explicitly mentioned trans and lesbian women.⁸⁷ Any impacts of the PPA in Vanuatu will depend on 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 with the conservative values of some individuals and institutions 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 informant reported that the Ministry for Youth and Sport had voiced support for inclusion of SOGI individuals in their work and that some promising interactions had occurred between VPride and the Ministry of Education. These are also the two ministries that mention diverse sexualities and orientations in regulations—the Teaching Service Act 2013 and the National Youth Authority Bill. In contrast, the values held by some senior decision-making staff in other departments were seen as critical barriers to progress.

Perspectives and approaches also vary among NGOs. Oxfam in Vanuatu is the only international NGO to openly support VPride and the SOGI community. Some local NGOs openly provide support, including Sista,⁸⁸ Wan Smol Bag,⁸⁹ and Human Capacity Development International, which supported VPride in developing its Strategic Plan 2020–2050.⁹⁰ Other international NGOs provide support more implicitly by, for example, including VPride members as participants in capacity-building workshops. VPride was present at UN Women's gender and humanitarian training in 2019, for example, and Care International included a trans member of VPride in its Young Women in Leadership program.

Respondents from international NGOs said that work on SOGI issues will require a “softly, softly, do no harm approach” to avoid “overstepping boundaries” in ways that could lead to resistance from more conservative members of Vanuatu society, including in the government. Without appropriate sensitization, there is the risk that work on SOGI issues could lead to backlash or worsen the situation for SOGI individuals by bringing greater attention to their presence or seeming to divert attention from other groups (for example, see accounts in Box 7).⁹¹

One KI described how NGOs' interest in working on these issues sometimes confronts challenges: a number of NGOs attended a sensitization workshop hosted by VPride for organizations interested in working on SOGI issues. During the meeting, however, 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 of 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). Clearly there is potential for NGO support and capacity on SOGI issues, but the KIs stated that progress will need to be made sensitively and recognize the norms and values of the local context. For this reason, informants said, many NGOs currently incorporate SOGI issues into their work and communication in terms of gender protection, human rights, and inclusivity.

One NGO informant said 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 its second phase (NGEP 2), due to be implemented over the period 2020–2024, constitute a significant positive step for gender equality in Vanuatu.

Most of the institutions whose staff were interviewed in this research showed strong interest in and support for the policy as well as good alignment between many of their current programming priorities and internal gender policies and the NGEP strategic areas. Among the examples given of progress on implementing the policy was the establishment of gender focal points within a number of government ministries.

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. Successfully implementing the NGEP 2 will therefore critically rely on supporting capacity and infrastructure.

Two fundamental requirements are a comprehensive implementation plan and a framework for monitoring and evaluating progress against the policy indicators. These elements were lacking for the first phase of the NGEP, but KIs reported that both are in development for the NGEP 2. There is also reportedly an intention by the DWA to coordinate with NGOs to map programming and encourage the alignment of work across the policy's strategic areas. Collaboration with NGOs can bring in external gender expertise in areas such as 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 as providing critical visibility and accountability for gender within the ministries' work. However, further progress will rely on broader sensitization about gender, particularly among senior decision makers. This effort 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 to effectively implement the gender policy and other gender work. This reality reportedly created a challenge for the Department of Women's Affairs, which was seen to have been left with the primary responsibility for coordinating and implementing the first phase of the NGEP, even though the wording of the policy indicated it should not be assigned this responsibility. 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 fulfill their gender responsibilities on top of the demands of their day-to-day jobs and reported a lack of systematic training or guidance in the roles. It was suggested that for the NGEP 2 the DWA should focus on coordination, while other institutions, including NGOs, should carry out actual implementation. More explicit communication about and promotion of the second phase of the policy could encourage the institutions that should be involved in implementing the policy to give it more attention.

The exclusion of SOGI was seen as a gap in the NGEP. The subject of SOGI rights remains highly contentious in Vanuatu. There are some indications of shifting attitudes and increasing acceptance in certain spheres, but 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. Given that SOGI rights are not mentioned in any other policy in Vanuatu, including them in a national policy—with wording similar to the PPA to which Vanuatu is a signatory, for example—would create an opportunity for Vanuatu to further its progress on SOGI rights in line with its endorsement of UN human rights resolutions. Some respondents suggested that incorporating SOGI rights, like gender equality, under the topic of human rights was a way to foster greater tolerance for the issue. Any work on SOGI needs to be done with careful sensitization using appropriate tools and expertise, such as the SEED framework and trained facilitators, to avoid unintended negative consequences.

With the implementation of the NGEP 2 in 2020–2024, there is considerable potential for real progress to be made toward gender equality in Vanuatu. Insights from the first phase of the policy provide valuable lessons that can be applied to maximize the effectiveness of the next phase.

Box 8: A summary of key findings and recommendations

- Inclusion of a comprehensive implementation plan and a framework for monitoring and evaluating progress against the policy indicators is fundamental.
- There is a significant need for broader sensitization about gender, particularly among 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 for the gender focal points would help elevate and deliver on the intended outcome of that work.
- Incorporating SOGI rights under the umbrella of human rights is a way to foster greater tolerance for the issue.
- The collective programming and resources of NGOs and other development partners in Vanuatu constitute a significant potential resource for implementing actions under the NGEF, but the government will need to effectively coordinate them.
- To ensure that the efforts of different actors complement one another in delivering on the NGEF 2, it will be valuable to map gender work across Vanuatu.
- Gender expertise from outside government can be leveraged to build the government's internal capacity. Projects and programs by development partners should therefore be designed to transfer technical skills.
- It will be key to reflect on insights and findings from the first phase of the NGEF in order to inform the effective implementation of the NGEF 2.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was prepared by Caitlin McCormack and Steve Jennings of 3Keel based on field research conducted by Caitlin in Vanuatu in February and March 2020.

The researchers are grateful to the team at Oxfam in Vanuatu for their support. In particular, Jill Makikon was instrumental in developing and shaping the project idea as well as providing much-appreciated support and guidance during field research.

Special thanks to Linda Kenni, who conducted the SEED case study research and provided invaluable facilitation and logistical support to Caitlin in Vanuatu. Thanks too to the research assistants who helped capture and record the information.

Many people provided input to the final draft of this report. Special mention should be made of the members of the peer review panel for their constructive critique and suggestions: Astrid Kersten, Namalie Jayasinghe, Sebastian Molano, Willy Missack, and Yasmine Bjornum.

3Keel are grateful to Oxfam US, especially to Kasey Ochiltree and Janice Ian Manlutac for their steering of the project.

The research was done with support from the Asia Pacific Local Innovation for Transformation (AP-Lift) project team who are implementing a disaster preparedness program in the Philippines, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu from 2017–2020.

Finally, we are thankful to all of the interviewees who generously shared their time, insights, and experiences with us.

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78748-650-8 in September 2020.

DOI: 10.21201/2020.6508

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

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