



PACIFIC  
WOMEN  
LEAD



# Many petals, one whole bloom

Strengthening SOGIESC inclusion in the Pacific



## About Pacific Women Lead

Pacific Women Lead is a portfolio of regional investments supported by the Australian Government to advance gender equality in the Pacific (\$170 million over 5 years, 2021-2026). The program is ambitious in its intent to take a Pacific-led, intersectional and transformative approach to promoting gender equality in the region. It is focused on delivering development outcomes for women and girls in all their diversity and bringing new emphasis to strengthening regional action and architecture in support of gender equality. This guidance note will continue to inform programs in the next phase of Pacific Women Lead. For more information go to the [Pacific Women Lead website](#).

## About the authors

Noelene Nabulivou and Kris Prasad are longtime PIDSOGIESC feminist activists and organisers throughout the region and globally. They were engaged by Pacific Women Lead Enabling Services to support the development of this guidance note. The work was led and informed by their extensive lived experience and expertise in human rights, gender justice, and social inclusion in the Pacific.

## About the illustrator

Regina Vaka'uta is a self-taught illustrator with over eight years of experience specialising in expressive, narrative-driven visual storytelling. Her practice spans character illustration, book projects, and collaborative publications, with a strong focus on humanitarian and NGO contexts. Her work is informed by Pacific cultures and values, translating complex social issues into accessible, culturally grounded visuals that centre care, dignity, and community.

## Acknowledgements

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For further information please contact: Alison George Contractor Representative DT Global Asia Pacific +61 3 9937 0725  
[Alison.George@dt-global.com](mailto:Alison.George@dt-global.com)

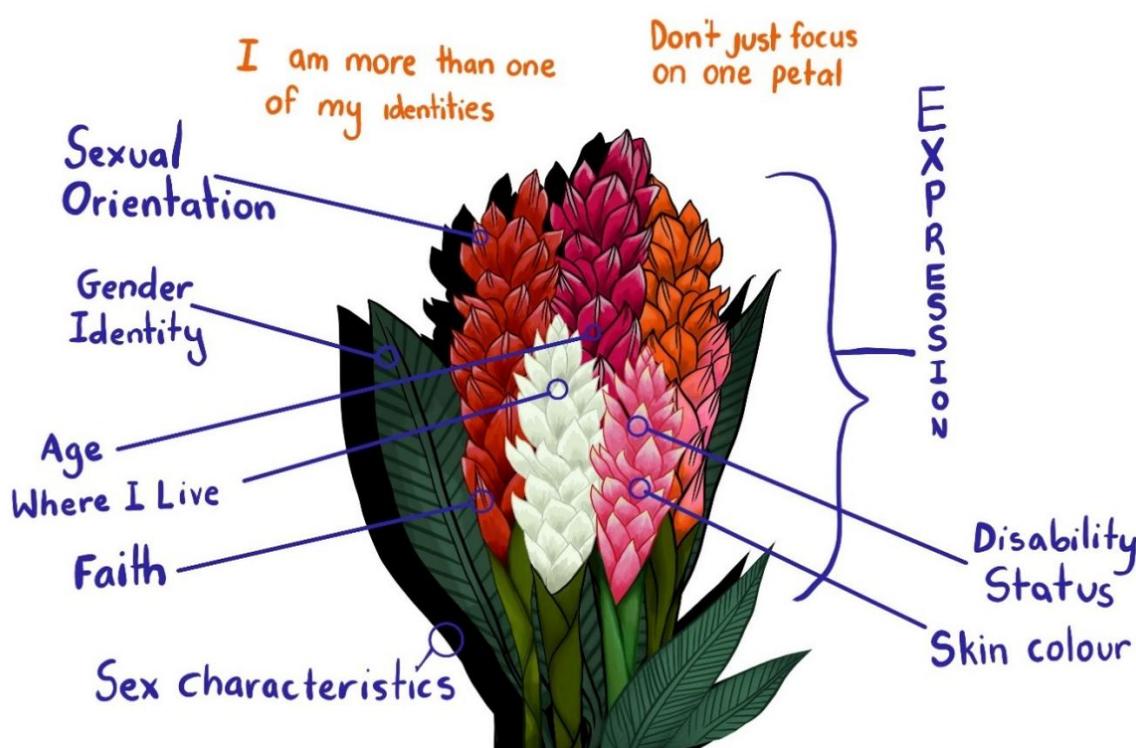
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# 1. Introduction

SOGIESC refers to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. The term comes from human rights discourse, and it is a protected characteristic under international human rights law. Everyone has a sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics, just as we have many other identities.

The ginger flower (see below) is a tool developed by the Pacific feminist collective, DIVA for Equality, to explain SOGIESC concepts in a culturally and ecologically relevant way. The bright, mass-petalled presence of the ginger flower reinforces the message that we should never just focus on one aspect of a person's identities (often their SOGIESC) and ignore their other realities. We all have different combinations of petals, and we all deserve to be seen as one whole, vibrant bloom.



When we talk about diverse SOGIESC, we are talking about those whose sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics fall outside socially dominant norms and who may therefore face discrimination or exclusion. This can take the form of ridicule, stigma, human rights violations, and indeed, as faced by too many Pacific people, extreme physical and sexual abuse, rape and murder.

Gender-based violence is one of the most common forms of human rights violations for persons of diverse SOGIESC. The risks of violence to punish those who are perceived as defying dominant gender and/or sexual norms are heavily compounded for Pacific lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, girls, and all people with diverse SOGIESC.

A transformative approach to gender equality requires addressing all forms of inequality. By intentionally including Pacific Islanders of diverse SOGIESC (PIDSOGIESC), gender programming can create safer, more responsive systems and policies that benefit everyone.

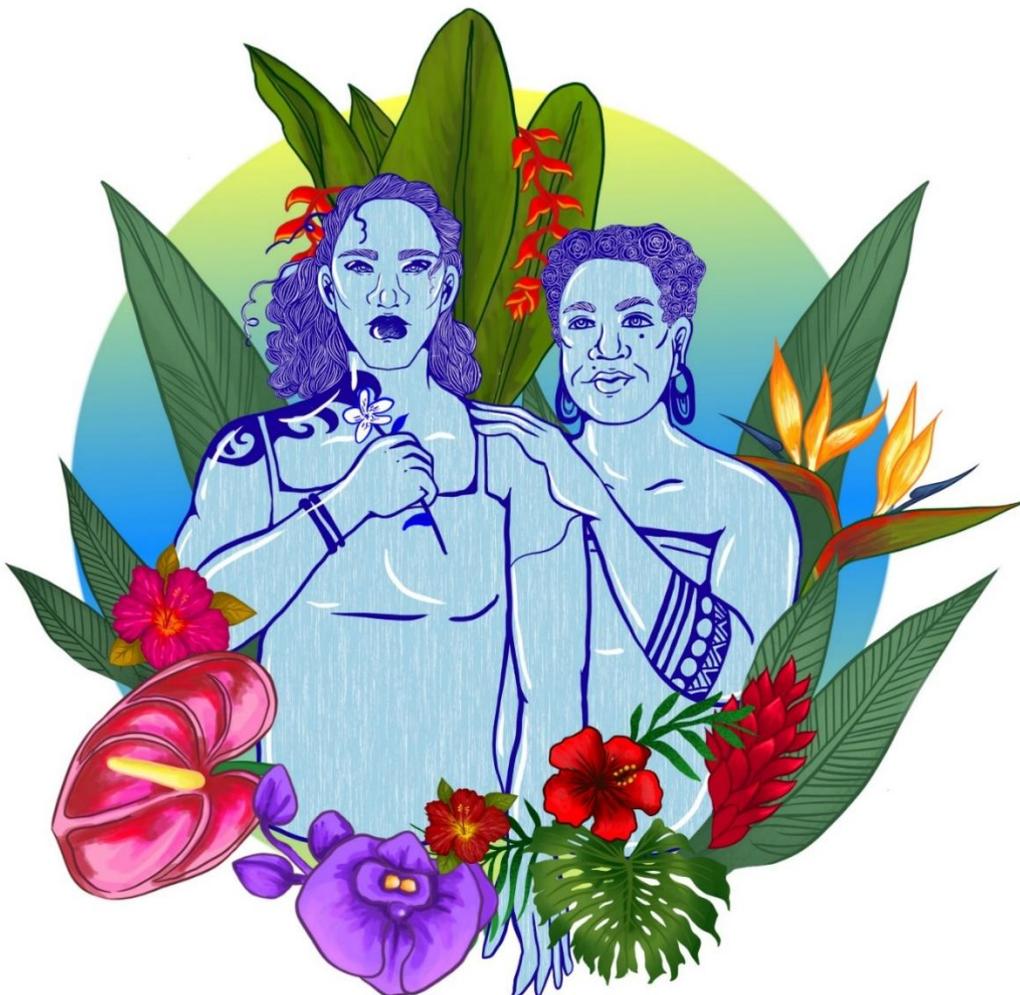
## 1.1 SOGIESC in the Pacific context

People of diverse SOGIESC have always been part of Pacific societies, with recognised cultural roles such as fa’afafine and fa’afatama in Samoa, leiti in Tonga, vakasalewalewa in Fiji, and palopa in Papua New Guinea. These identities have longstanding cultural recognition across the Pacific.

During the colonial period, legal and social systems introduced new regulatory frameworks around gender and sexuality. Many of these remain in place today and continue to shape experiences of exclusion. Several Pacific countries still have laws in place that criminalise same-sex intimacy. This reinforces stigma, even when laws are not enforced.

Regional frameworks such as the revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration and the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women’s Human Rights explicitly affirm inclusion for women and people of diverse SOGIESC. A strong and growing number of Pacific-led organisations are actively collaborating to advance decriminalisation, policy reform, and advocacy.

Importantly, many Pacific Women Lead (PWL) partners are engaged in this work. The Urgent Action Fund, Pacific Feminist Fund, and Women’s Fund Fiji, through the Amplify-Invest-Reach (AIR) partnership, apply a strong SOGIESC lens in practice and directly resource SOGIESC organisations and human rights defenders. This guidance note aims to build on and extend such leadership, ensuring consistent inclusion across all PWL-supported initiatives.



## 1.2 How to use this guidance note

This guidance note is intended to serve as an entry point for learning for those unfamiliar with the topic, and a form of validation for partners and allies who are already quietly undertaking this work. It is not intended to be a comprehensive document, but a concise and accessible resource that can be used to understand SOGIESC in the Pacific context and to support practical strategies to incorporate SOGIESC considerations into programs and organisational practices.

The following principles, drawn from consultations and a review of Pacific-led resources, are intended to guide engagement with SOGIESC-related issues in ways that are contextually appropriate, aligned with international human rights standards, and programmatically effective.

### **Principle 1: Do no harm, but don't do nothing**

This principle emphasises the importance of balancing risk management with meaningful action. While safety and political considerations are critical, over-cautious approaches can result in exclusion or missed opportunities. We encourage you to undertake robust risk analysis and identify safe, context-specific entry points to support inclusive programming for people of diverse SOGIESC.

### **Principle 2: Pacific-led and contextualised**

This principle reinforces the importance of PIDSOGIESC voices and leadership. The most impactful solutions are co-developed with and for the communities they serve. Make sure that your work reflects local knowledge, lived experience, and contextual expertise.

### **Principle 3: Historically and culturally grounded, and aligned with human rights standards**

This principle highlights the importance of grounding work in local cultural knowledge, Indigenous terminology, and historical context. In many Pacific societies, diverse gender identities and expressions have longstanding cultural recognition, which differ from dominant Western categorisations. We encourage you to draw on this context while aligning your work with international human rights frameworks, including commitments to freedom from violence and discrimination.

### **Principle 4: Intersectional analysis**

An intersectional approach supports a more accurate understanding of how different social factors – such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic status – interact to shape people's experiences. Applying this lens can help identify groups facing multiple and overlapping forms of exclusion and design responses that are more inclusive and effective.

### **Principle 5: Interlinked**

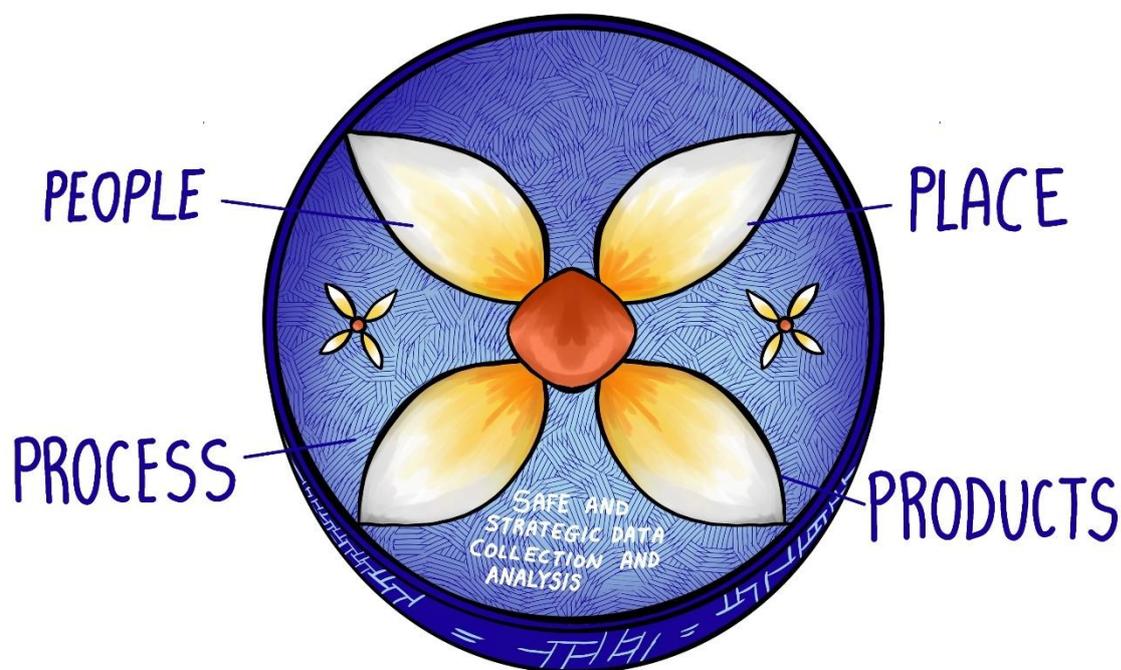
SOGIESC-related exclusion intersects with a range of human rights and development challenges, including access to services, access to justice, livelihoods, climate change and environmental impacts, and gender-based violence. Recognising these interlinkages can support more holistic programming and reduce the risk of excluding people of diverse SOGIESC across sectoral interventions.

### **Principle 6: Reciprocity and partnership**

Work in partnership with local SOGIESC-led organisations. This means not only consulting with them and seeking their guidance, but also offering reciprocal support such as technical exchange, shared learning, and access to networks.

## 2. SOGIESC inclusion and the 4 Ps framework

This section provides practical advice for integrating SOGIESC inclusion principles into your organisation's operations and programming. It is built on the foundational 4 Ps framework which provides a strategic, whole-of-institution approach to SOGIESC inclusion.



The first aspect of the framework – **people** – is about integrating SOGIESC principles into the entire employment cycle, including recruitment, onboarding, performance management, and exit, to ensure a whole-of-institution approach.

The second petal, **place**, is about making sure that your organisation's physical and digital spaces are just, inclusive and safe for all individuals.

**Process** is about developing and implementing systems and processes that embed SOGIESC considerations across your organisation, and its programming.

The fourth petal is about **products**. This aspect of the framework emphasises the importance of ensuring that your organisation's institutional products and communication materials reflect a clear and visible commitment to SOGIESC inclusion.

The **safe and strategic collection of data** and gender-just analysis underpins all four aspects of the framework. This dimension focuses on the ethical collection of data to address the evidence gap and inform continuous improvement.

The following sub-sections elaborate on each dimension of the framework and provide options on how to apply them to your work.

## 2.1 People

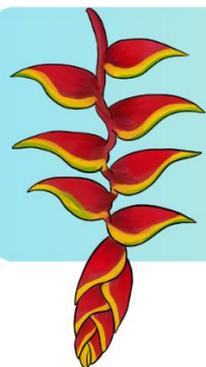
### Embed diversity, equity, and inclusion into how you recruit, support, and develop staff, partners, and leaders.

Embedding SOGIESC inclusion principles into recruitment, training, and staff support ensures inclusion is part of your organisation's structure, culture and systems - not an afterthought.

When people of diverse SOGIESC feel safe, respected, and valued, they bring forward perspectives, critique, knowledge and lived experiences that might otherwise go unheard or ignored. This broadens understanding, sparks innovation, and helps to develop programs that are effective, relevant and responsive to diverse community needs.

### Actions

- Make SOGIESC inclusion explicit in all organisational policies, including those related to safeguarding and anti-discrimination.
- Implement policies that promote diversity, equity and inclusion in hiring and promotions and to ensure equal opportunities for professional development and advancement.
- When recruiting staff, promote the opportunity on platforms used by SOGIESC communities to widen applicant pools.
- Consider including an inclusion statement on job advertisements, such as 'we welcome applications from people of diverse SOGIESC.'
- Provide ongoing training and development opportunities for staff on SOGIESC and Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI).
- Seek opportunities for PIDSOGIESC inclusion in your Board, senior management and reference groups.
- Support and empower those in leadership roles to champion SOGIESC inclusion in their spheres of influence.



Make sure that inclusion is meaningful, not tokenistic. This means creating genuine opportunities for people of diverse SOGIESC to shape decisions, contribute expertise, and lead change.

## 2.2 Place

### Create safe, affirming and inclusive environments – both physical and virtual.

PIDSOGIESC communities face unique risks, especially in places where their identities are criminalised. Many young PIDSOGIESC people in particular, will not access development and human rights services despite having the most need, because of the perceived or actual stigma, maltreatment and discrimination they face in many places and spaces.

You can mitigate these risks by creating spaces for support, accompaniment, dialogue and engagement. This involves creating a safe, confidential, judgement-free and respectful environment where staff feel comfortable discussing SOGIESC issues and can ask questions openly.

### Actions

- Make any necessary accommodations to ensure full participation, such as providing all-gender restrooms.
- Promote open communication and psychological safety so that employees can voice their opinions and contribute ideas without fear of negative consequences.
- Work in partnership with local, diverse SOGIESC leaders to create safe spaces, both physical and virtual, that are culturally appropriate and contextually relevant. They can provide a helpful organisational audit and develop checklists for your organisation.
- Talk openly about SOGIESC inclusion so that PIDSOGIESC people know that they are welcome. Be creative and inclusive in communication campaigns about services, policies and take part in Pride Days and campaigns, so that you are clearly a public ally.
- If you are going to run a LGBTIQ+ group, event or project, ideally it will be facilitated by a person who is a member of the community the event is for (such as a transgender women's facilitator for a transgender women's group), so that they have an understanding of people's needs, and can help create a truly safe and inclusive space.
- Include a statement in your organisational registration, articles of association and Mission, stating that you advocate for a feminist approach that is based on human rights and gender equity, that is PIDSOGIESC inclusive and promotes justice, inclusion and care of all people and the living planet.



Make sure that online spaces, such as your organisation's social media pages, have community guidelines and moderators in place to protect against hate speech or inflammatory comments.

## 2.3 Process

### Embed inclusion into systems, operations and programming.

For SOGIESC inclusion to be truly effective, it must be integrated into every stage of the operational and project management cycle, ensuring that these principles move beyond concepts and into tangible action.

### Actions

#### *In the operational domain:*

- Integrate the key principles from section 1.2 into your key guiding documents such as strategic plans and monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks.
- Address any incidents of discrimination or bias promptly, decisively and with sensitivity, sending a clear message that such behaviour is not tolerated.
- Regularly review compensation and hiring criteria to tackle any inequalities and ensure transparency in salary structures.
- Before any public-facing SOGIESC work, conduct a thorough risk analysis to identify potential threats to individuals and the organisation, and PIDSOGIESC in your community.
- Embed SOGIESC responsibilities into your organisation's safeguarding code of conduct to ensure accountability and a systematic approach to protecting the individuals and communities you work with. This should include guidance for responding to internal and external pushback, both online and offline.

#### *In the programming cycle:*

- **Conceptualisation and design:** Conduct a robust GEDSI analysis to understand SOGIESC-specific gaps, barriers, and entry points. Actively consult with PIDSOGIESC communities to ensure the project design is relevant and grounded in their needs and lived experiences.
- **Implementation and partnership:** Foster reciprocal partnerships with local SOGIESC movements. Ensure that PIDSOGIESC groups and individuals are paid for their knowledge and expertise.
- **Activity design:** Activities should be designed with attention to participant safety, confidentiality, and meaningful participation. This includes considering whether mixed-group formats may create risks for some participants and, where appropriate, incorporating separate or targeted engagement processes for people of diverse SOGIESC.



Mainstream organisations should seek guidance from, and provide reciprocal support to, SOGIESC-led groups, ensuring that the work is not extractive but truly collaborative.

## 2.4 Products

### Ensure communications, programs, and services are inclusive and affirming.

Effective and inclusive communication is crucial for advancing SOGIESC inclusion, as it serves as a primary means of sharing knowledge, fostering empathy, and advocating for change.

### Actions

- **Use language that is accurate, respectful, and appropriate to the local context.** Where possible, apply gender-neutral terms rather than assuming gender, and use names, titles, and pronouns as individuals request. Materials should be reviewed to avoid unnecessary gendered assumptions or stereotypes.
- **Ensure graphics, illustrations and photographs are inclusive** and reflect the diversity and intersectionality of your community.
- **Humanise the narrative:** Move beyond statistics and data by incorporating quotes, personal stories, and lived experiences to foster empathy and understanding among diverse audiences. When safe to do so, this approach helps put a human face to complex issues.
- **An ethical approach to storytelling requires prioritising the narrator's agency, dignity, and resilience,** supporting people's ability to shape their own stories in a way that reflects their truth. Stories should challenge implicit biases and avoid portraying narrators as one-dimensional victims or heroes; instead, they should use strength-based framing.
- **Prioritise local voices:** The most powerful narratives come directly from communities themselves. Support safe, community-led storytelling and the amplification of stories from the ground, always ensuring explicit consent before sharing any information. This involves investing in relationships to build trust and ensuring ongoing informed consent and transparency throughout the storytelling process.
- **Ensure your online platforms and social media channels are safely moderated against hate speech,** creating spaces for constructive dialogue rather than harmful debate about the lives and human rights of PIDSOGIESC.
- **Encourage staff and volunteers to share their pronouns.** This is a foundational practice that shapes a welcoming workplace culture.



## 2.5 Safe and strategic data collection and analysis

**Collect and use data safely and strategically to address the evidence gap, amplify diverse experiences, and inform continuous improvement.**

An evidence-informed approach to SOGIESC inclusion in the Pacific requires a balanced use of both qualitative and quantitative data. In contexts where same-sex intimacy remains criminalised or highly stigmatised, over-reliance on quantitative data can produce incomplete or distorted findings. Qualitative approaches are therefore critical for understanding lived experiences and identifying context-specific barriers and opportunities for inclusion.

How data is analysed and applied is as important as how it is collected. When used strategically, data can inform program design, highlight patterns of exclusion, and support evidence-based policy dialogue.

### Actions

- Before collecting any information, assess potential risks to participants and put appropriate safeguards in place, including informed consent procedures, options for anonymity, and secure data storage and access protocols.
- **Prioritise the collection of qualitative data alongside quantitative data:** Combine traditional metrics with personal stories, lived experiences, and community narratives to create a fuller and more compassionate understanding of SOGIESC realities.
- **Engage PIDSOGIESC-led organisations as equal partners:** Involve local SOGIESC groups in every stage of research – from defining questions to analysing and sharing results – to ensure work is safe, relevant, and community-led. Offer technical or logistical support to local SOGIESC-led partners to build their capacity in data collection best practices, and learn from their contextual and cultural expertise in return.
- **Invest in inclusive research and learning:** Allocate time and resources to strengthen data systems, qualitative research methods, and contextual studies, especially on underexplored or sensitive areas, ensuring to identify any points of potential bias and address these.
- **Adopt the ‘Do no harm, but don’t do nothing’ principle:** Avoid collecting data that could endanger individuals, but find safe, creative ways to build evidence such as through using anonymised storytelling or community dialogues.
- **Use evidence to drive advocacy and accountability:** Translate insights into action by sharing learning safely with communities, partners, and decision-makers to strengthen inclusion and influence policy change.



In the Pacific, where discussions around sexuality and gender can be highly sensitive, qualitative approaches can create a safe space for people to share their experiences in their own words.

### 3. Conclusion

This guidance note provides a practical framework to strengthen SOGIESC inclusion across different stages of program design and implementation, taking into account local context, risk, and capacity. By applying the 4 Ps framework, you can identify context-appropriate entry points to strengthen inclusive practice within your existing programs.

The foundations for this work have been established. The opportunity now is to translate this guidance into practice through sustained engagement, learning, and partnership.



## Annex 1: Glossary

**A note on terminology:** Terminology around SOGIESC is constantly evolving, and what is appropriate in one context may not be in another. When in doubt, it is best to defer to the terms used by PIDSOGIESC communities themselves. In many contexts, there is a preference to use Indigenous SOGIESC frameworks as Western LGBTIQ+ constructs do not necessarily fit the local context and cultural identities. By using this language, you are not only being inclusive but are actively validating the expertise of Pacific-led movements.

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**Cisgender:** Sometimes shortened to cis, this term is used to describe people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Feminism:** Belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes and genders, expressed especially through organised activity on behalf of women's and gender diverse human rights and interests.

**Gender expression:** Each person's presentation of their gender through physical appearance – including but not limited to dress, hairstyles, accessories, cosmetics, and mannerisms, speech, behavioural patterns, names, and personal references. Like sexual orientation and gender identity, gender expression can be dynamic over time. In most places, the greater that one transgresses gendered norms of expression, the more likely one is to experience violence, stigma, and discrimination. Examples of gender expression include masculine, feminine, and androgynous.

**Gender identity:** Each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth or to the gender attributed to them by society. It includes the personal sense of the body and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech, and mannerisms, which may or may not involve a desire for modification of appearance or function of the body by medical, surgical, or other means. Gender identity can be dynamic over time. Examples include cisgender and transgender.

**Intersectionality:** An analytic framework for understanding how multiple social identities, such as being Indigenous, a Pacific Islander, gender, sexuality, or having a disability, overlap and interact to create unique and compounding experiences of discrimination, power, and disadvantage.

**Pacific identities:** Communities in the Pacific have their own culturally specific terms relating to diverse SOGIESC. These include fa'afafine (Samoa and American Samoa), leiti/ fakaleiti (Tonga), fakafifine (Niue), akava'ine (Cook Islands), māhū (Tahiti and Hawaii), vakasalewalewa (Fiji) and palopa (Papua New Guinea). Some communities use the acronym MVPFAFF (mahu, vakasalewalewa, palopa, fa'afafine, akava'ine, fakaleiti/leiti, and fakafifine) as a way of centring Pacific identities. This approach emphasises Pacific-specific cultural and social frameworks for understanding gender and sexuality, which differ from Western LGBTIQ+ categorisations.

**PIDSOGIESC:** Refers to Pacific Islanders of diverse SOGIESC, including Pacific Indigenous SOGIESC highlighted above.

**Queer:** Queer is a multi-faceted word that is used in different ways and means different things to different people. It can mean that you are attracted to people of many genders; Sometimes it is used to denote those who do not fit cultural norms around sexuality and/or gender identity/expression; and some people use it as a political identity that shows them as transgressive, revolutionary, anti-assimilation, and challenging of the status quo.

**Sex characteristics:** The physical traits that determine biological sex, including primary sex characteristics (reproductive organs like testes and ovaries) and secondary sex characteristics (features that appear at puberty, such as facial hair, breasts, and voice changes). Chromosomes, genes, and hormones are also integral sex characteristics.

**Sexual orientation:** A person's capacity for profound affection, emotional and sexual attraction to and intimate and sexual relations with individuals of a different gender, of the same gender, or of more than one gender. Everyone has a sexual orientation, and it can be dynamic over time. Examples include gay, lesbian and straight.

**SOGIESC and diverse SOGIESC:** SOGIESC is a term derived from human rights discourse, and it is a protected characteristic under international human rights law. All people have SOGIESC, and diverse SOGIESC is used to refer to forms of SOGIESC of LGBTIQ+ people, which are currently non-normative in many countries.

**Transgender:** This term, often shorted to trans, refers to people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were assigned at birth.

## Annex 2: Resources and further reading

- [Laws on Us: A global overview of legal progress and backtracking on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics](#), ILGA World. 2024.
- [Ten Essentials for Measuring Violence Based on SOGIESC](#), UN Women, and WHO, 2025.
- [CEDAW country reviews: Protecting trans people’s human rights](#), ILGA World, 2024.
- [Outcomes Statement of the 3rd Pacific Human Rights Conference on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics](#).
- [Pacific Small Islands LBQ Women’s Priorities, July 2024](#).
- [Unjust, Unequal, Unstoppable: Fiji LBT women and gender non-conforming people tipping the scales toward justice](#), DIVA, 2019.
- [My Body, My Human Rights, and My Activism on SRHR in Fiji](#), A community resource booklet developed by the Fiji LGBTQI Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Activist Peer Support Group, with DIVA for Equality, 2022.
- [Leitis in Waiting](#) (documentary).
- [Meet the transwomen in the Pacific decolonising mindsets](#) (broadcast news story).