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Solomon Islands Electoral Commission



GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION (GESI) POLICY

2022-2024



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FOREWORD

In accordance with the constitutional mandate, *an important responsibility of the Electoral Commission is to ensure that all people, including women and other marginalized populations, can participate equally in the electoral process. This Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) policy supports the SIEO efforts to enhance equality and inclusive participation in the electoral processes in Solomon Islands.*

This Policy has been developed to enhance inclusiveness with a particular focus on building the understanding of the issues related to gender and social inclusion in the administration of elections. It also aims to continue the steps and actions already in place and to intensify efforts to increase the participation of women and other underrepresented groups, particularly people with disabilities (PWDs) in electoral events throughout the electoral cycle.

This Policy *is developed on the* understanding that gender mainstreaming and social inclusion are a long-term process and expressed the commitment of the electoral authorities to integrate the gender perspective and to adopt measures for a more gender sensitive electoral management body. A number of concrete initial short-term actions -some of them which have commenced to be implemented- are identified in the accompanying Action Plan. The SIEO GESI Policy and Action Plan were shared with the staff of the Commission and the Women's Development Division (WDD) of the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs.

Accordingly, the Policy and the accompanying action plan propose a roadmap which can serve as a strategic guide for the execution of activities throughout the electoral cycle based on the principles of gender equality and social inclusion.

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable work done by all SIEO staff, UNDP SECSIP advisers and external stakeholders in the preparation of this Policy on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion and its Action Plan.

Chief Electoral Officer
May 2022
Honiara, Solomon Islands



Solomon Islands commitment to GESI

Solomon Islands has committed to gender equality. The Constitution of the Solomon Islands pledges to equality and non-discrimination for all its citizens. The following instruments express the commitment of Solomon Islands to social inclusion and gender equality:

1. **The Constitution of Solomon Islands.** Section 15 (1) establishes the prohibition against discrimination establishing that *'subject to the provisions of subsections (5), (6) and (9) of this section, no law shall make any provision that is discriminatory either itself or in its effect'*. Section 15(4) states *'in this section, the expression discriminatory means **affording different treatment to different persons attributable wholly or mainly to their respective descriptions by race, place of origin, political opinion, colour, creed or sex** whereby persons of one such description are subjected to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of another such description are not made subject or are accorded privileges or advantages which are not accorded to persons of another such description'*. Pursuant to subsection (5) (f) and (g), *'subsection (1) of section 15 shall not apply to any law so far as that law makes provision...(f) for the advancement of the more disadvantaged members of the community; or (g) whereby persons of any such description as is mentioned in the preceding subsection may be subjected to any disability or restriction or may be accorded any privilege or advantage which, having regard to its nature and to special circumstances pertaining to those persons or to persons of any other such description, is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society.*
2. **The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979).** This is the international bill of rights for women adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly which came into force in 1981. It provides a definition of discrimination against women and establishes an agenda for action to end gender-based discrimination. The Solomon Islands is a State party to CEDAW since 6 May 2002. Solomon Islands also ratified the Optional Protocol.
3. **The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD 2006).** Its main message is that persons with disabilities are entitled to enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination. Solomon Islands signed the CRPD on 23 September 2008 however has not yet ratified this Convention.
4. **Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region (1994).** The ESCAP serves as the United Nations' regional hub promoting cooperation among countries to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The two focal points for addressing People with Disabilities (PWDs) national commitments according to these international instruments are the Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) programme of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) and the People with Disabilities of Solomon Islands (PWDSI) Association.
5. **The Pacific Platform for Action (PPA) for the Advancement of Women (1994).** The PPA, adopted in 1994 by all Pacific Islands Forum (PIFs) members as part of the Noumea Declaration, formally recognizes that women's

development should become a top priority for all Pacific Island governments.

6. **The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995).** The Beijing Declaration sets out an agenda for women's empowerment with the objective of removing all obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making.
7. **The National Policy on Disability 2005-2010.** Intended to remove social barriers and develop a system for the full participation of people with disability. It aimed to strengthen inter-sectoral collaboration for the provision of both special and inclusive regular education. A National Disability Inclusive Development Policy 2013-2018 was formulated but not endorsed by the Cabinet.
8. **The Solomon Islands National Gender Equality and Women's Development (GEWD) Policy 2016-2020.** This Policy developed by the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) establishes the overarching framework of the government for achieving gender equality in Solomon Islands.
9. **National Policy on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls (EVAWG) 2016 – 2020.** This Policy sets out SIG priorities on this.
10. **The Solomon Islands National Development Strategy (2016 - 2035)** Improving the Social and Economic Livelihoods of all Solomon Islanders in particular its '*Medium Term Strategy 7: Improve gender equality and support the disadvantaged and the vulnerable*' which includes the adoption of policies on the:
 - Strengthening of existing women's local institutions to make awareness and encourage Involvement of women in development decision making and implementation.
 - Strengthening the support to responsible bodies such as the disabled society to support both disadvantage and advantage groups.
 - Development of policies and programmes for the establishment of support centres for vulnerable, disadvantaged including disabled, women and children and elderly people in rural areas.
11. **Public Service Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy 2020 – 2025 (draft).** Submitted for Cabinet's review.



Problems, challenges and opportunities



A number of obstacles remain to be addressed by SIEO to be a more socially inclusive and participatory institution in Solomon Islands. The following are particularly relevant to the SIEO to continue enhancing the inclusiveness of this institution:

Problems

1. SIEO faces staff constraints and has no field presence. This poses enormous difficulties for the conduct of recruitment processes for temporary staff which require the identification of a significant number of suitable candidates within a very short timeframe.
2. Legal provisions may pose restrictions on the availability of sex disaggregated data to obtain accurate figures on sex-disaggregated figures of voters
3. Lack of updated information on the needs, number and location of people living with disabilities (PWD).

Challenges

1. Making gender sensitive and socially inclusive policies relating to the implementation of electoral events and building staff knowledge on them
2. Effective implementation of policy provisions related to gender and social inclusion throughout the electoral cycle.
3. Promoting effective public awareness by reaching out to targeted communities with issues concerning gender and social inclusion
4. Effective partnerships in the implementation of policy provisions related to gender and social inclusion due to varying degrees of gender awareness and sensitisation
5. Mobilizing necessary resources for providing services and facilities in election as provisioned by policy relating to gender and social inclusion.

Opportunities

1. To adopt a policy that reflects the commitments of Solomon Islands enshrined in the Constitution and as a State Party to the CEDAW and a signatory to the CRPD and all other international, regional and national obligations related to gender and inclusion policies.
2. To reflect the commitment of SIEO to continue building on its past efforts and to expand with more targeted actions towards a more gender sensitive and socially inclusive institution

Moving Forward



The SIEO Policy on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) and the accompanying Action Plan contributes to achieving gender and social inclusion responsive programmes and services, supporting the equal participation of women and men and PWD in decision-making, governance, and leadership. It also promotes civic and voter education for women, girls, and people with disabilities in the schools.

The GESI Policy has been developed at a critical time when the national government is continuing to spearhead an agenda of reform. The Solomon Islands Government (SIG) Constitutional and legislative reform has already led to changes in the Constitution and in the electoral legal framework (namely the 2018 Electoral Act which entered into force on 25 September 2018 and regulations thereof). A variety of other legal and institutional changes have been identified for further consideration¹ which

¹ For example, this may include:

- The review of the Provincial Government Act for the inclusion of provisions to enable Temporary Special Measures to increase the number of women members in provincial assemblies
- The finalization of the bill to amend the Political Parties Integrity Act

can continue to contribute to the foundations for progress towards gender equality and social inclusion.

Policy objectives



1. To incorporate a socially inclusive approach throughout the mandate and scope of action of the SIEO
2. To plan and implement inclusive electoral processes taking into account the needs of different segments of the electorate and in particular those of women and PWD
3. To contribute, within its mandate and scope of action, to raise citizenship awareness on gender equality and social inclusion.

POLICY

1. SIEO will explicitly demonstrate its commitment to the principle of equality and the prohibition of discrimination enshrined in Section 15 of the Constitution of Solomon Islands as well as to the obligations of international treaties and instruments. It will do so in the implementation of its legal mandate throughout the electoral cycle as decision-makers and in the performance of election managers, and permanent and temporary staff hired by this Office in all the different positions in its hierarchy.
2. SIEO commits to bring gender and social inclusion perspectives to any legal instrument, including regulations and administrative instructions and forms. In

particular, as the executive branch of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission², SIEO will, if requested to do so, provide commentary for the consideration of SIEC, on gender and social inclusion aspects on bills and other instruments referred to SIEC pursuant to Section 58(2) of the Constitution.

3. SIEO commits to conduct continuous study and research to identify and meet the needs of voters and candidates and to enhance inclusiveness and active participation of the electorate, including disadvantaged groups, in electoral events throughout the electoral cycle. This will include, to the extent possible, the collection of disaggregated data related to gender and PWD. Particular efforts will be made to use these data towards the improvement of services to enhance the participation of women and PWD.
4. SIEO will explicitly demonstrate non-discrimination in all its practices and will provide equality of opportunity in the employment career advancement where applicable, of permanent and temporary staff.
5. SIEO will develop capacity building activities including trainings with focus on the needs of women and PWD to increase their prospects to participate in elections including its administration and hold increasingly responsible management positions.
6. In the implementation of voter awareness actions, SIEO will identify, and address gender and social inclusion needs (including election related violence) and design target campaigns to address them.
7. Mechanisms to address issues (including complaints) related to gender and social inclusion will be established.
8. SIEO will hold an inclusive review of the policy once every two years with regular monitoring in between, to continually reflect on attitudes, behaviours, policies, and institutions that may be a barrier to the full implementation of this policy and target action plan.
9. SIEO will ensure that all its staff both permanent and temporary is familiar with this Policy.
10. The annual report to be prepared by the CEO will include a section on GESI and the progress made in the implementation of this policy and its target action plan.

This policy commits the Electoral Office (SIEO) to gender equality and social inclusion (GESI). It commits SIEO to inclusive and equitable actions in its internal and external

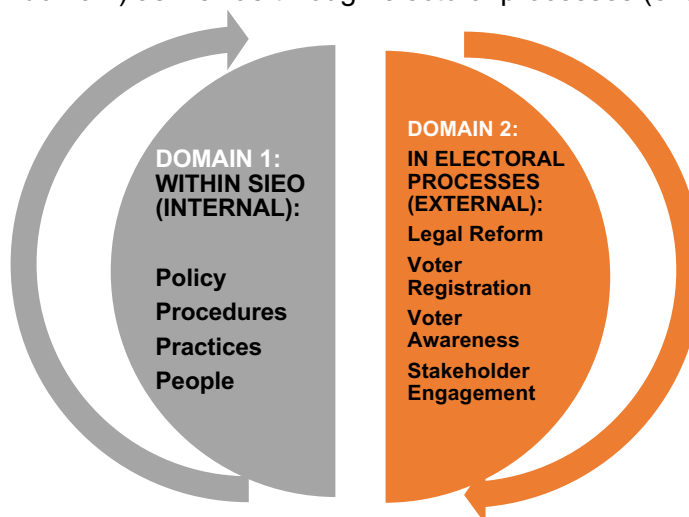
² Section 58(2) of the Constitution states as follows: Every proposed Bill and every proposed regulation or other instrument having the force of law relating to the registration of electors for the election of members of Parliament or to the election of such members shall be referred to the Electoral Commission at such time as shall give sufficient opportunity to make comments thereon before the Bill is introduced in Parliament or, as the case may be, the regulation or other instrument is made.

operations and in how the Commission discharges its constitutional and legal responsibilities to enable the exercise of electoral rights without fear or favour.

The policy seeks social inclusion and equal participation of women and men and other disadvantaged groups such as PWD at all levels of decision-making, governance and leadership as well as targets the increased awareness and acknowledgement of voter and elections related issues to contribute to the consolidation of rule of law.

Domains to implement SIEO policy on GESI

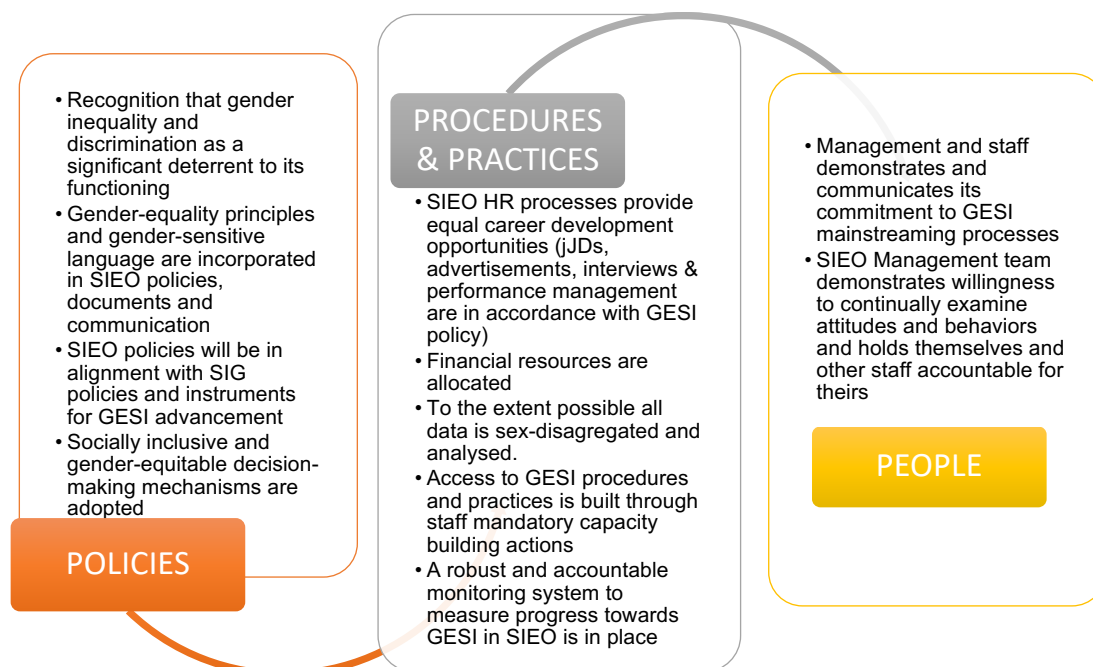
The SIEO policy on gender and social inclusion (GESI) will be implemented within SIEO (internal domain) as well as through electoral processes (external domain):



1. SIEO internal domain

- a) Foster an organizational culture that exemplifies SIEO's commitment to gender equality and social inclusion (GESI).
- b) Guide SIEO's staff and advisers in adopting principles and practice of gender equality and social inclusion in the work and in their work-related relationships within and outside SIEO.
- c) Establish and review SIEO career development and internal institutional procedures and manuals to ensure integration and coherence with GESI principles.
- d) SIEO establishes a budget allocation for the progressive implementation of the GESI objectives.
- e) A female and male gender focal positions to be established within the SIEO to be progressively realised
- f) Train SIEO staff (both permanent and temporary) on GESI to build their knowledge throughout the electoral cycle to prevent any direct, indirect or unintentional discrimination in the exercise of their duties with respect to the implementation of the fundamental rights of citizens related to the participation in the electoral processes.

- g) Monitor and evaluate practices and progress made on GESI advancement.
- h) SIEO management and staff carry their duties demonstrating commitment to GESI mainstreaming processes within the electoral cycle.



2. SIEO external domain

- a) Establish procedures and systems to encourage gender equality and social inclusion at all stages of electoral processes in the Solomon Islands.
- b) Support GESI strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive and proactive participation in electoral reform, voter registration, complaint mechanisms, campaigning, polling throughout all the phases of the electoral cycle.
- c) Support the design and production of gender sensitive voter awareness actions and materials with illustrations and graphics promoting gender equality and social inclusion perspectives.
- d) Design and implement GESI oriented strategies for the engagement of stakeholders with particular focus on enhancing traditionally marginalized segments of the population

INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

The present Policy outlines SIEO's vision and commitments to inclusion of all segments of the electorate. Accordingly, social inclusion and gender equality are considered a key part of its core business of conducting credible electoral processes in Solomon Islands. It is supported by a Target Action Plan, which will guide SIEO in turning the Policy into the implementation of concrete actions linked to the mandate and scope of action of the SIEO.

As part of implementing the Policy on Social Inclusion, SIEO will mainstream gender and social inclusion internally within its operations and externally in its interactions with other stakeholders.

Gender equality and social inclusion will be reflected in all of SIEO's policies, procedures, practices and staff. The SIEO must be seen as an institution in which gender and social inclusion have been mainstreamed – and a partner in transforming gender relations and encouraging the inclusion of socially marginalized groups other stakeholders.

It is expected that SIEO partner entities (government agencies and development partners) will provide technical support and tools to equip staff at all levels of the organization to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their work with the perspective of achieving gender equality and social inclusion within the electoral cycle in Solomon Islands.

To this end, SIEO will appoint a gender focal point and an alternate to lead the mainstreaming of gender and social inclusion in the SIEO. The focal point/s will be responsible for monitoring progress towards greater gender equality within the electoral cycle in Solomon Islands. It is advisable that these appointments are for an initial period of 6 to 12 months. Depending on availability and workload of staff as well as priorities to be delivered throughout the electoral cycle, possible rotation to enable flexibility and distribution of tasks among staff members may be considered.

The SIEO will form a GESI internal committee to oversee the implementation of the GESI Policy and Action Plan within the Commission. A crucial role of the Committee is to design a monitoring and evaluation plan. The Committee will meet at least twice a year to assess the implementation of the Policy and Action Plan. The GESI committee will be chaired by the CEO and comprised of the GESI focal points and at least one representative from the operations and corporate division. The Terms of reference for this committee are to be submitted to the SIEC for its endorsement within 2 months from the adoption of this policy.

The GESI committee will be responsible for the implementation of the Policy on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion. The CEO shall report annually on the implementation to the Electoral Commissioners. A section on the progress made on GESI will be included in the office annual report.

Gender and social inclusion policies address fundamental aspects of people's behaviors and attitudes and is a unique type of organizational change - one that is transformative and empowering. It is not just about SIEO expressing its commitment and adopting new procedures. It also requires that SIEO staff and advisers assess and address their own beliefs, perceptions, biases and behaviors about gender and social inclusion.



GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Discrimination is the intended or accomplished differential treatment of persons or social groups for reasons of certain generalized traits.

Discrimination against women is defined by the CEDAW as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.” **Indirect discrimination against women** may occur when laws, policies and programmes are based on seemingly gender-neutral criteria which in their actual effect have a detrimental impact on women.

Discrimination against PWD is when a PWD is treated less well or put at a disadvantage for a reason that relates to his/her disability. The treatment could be a one-off action, the application of a rule or policy or the existence of physical or communication barriers which make accessing something difficult or impossible.

Empowerment can be defined as “the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets.”

Equity refers to the concept of fairness and involves access to equal opportunities and the development of basic capacities. To ensure equity, it is necessary to recognise that some groups have been disadvantaged and even though the rules do not specifically discriminate against some people, they could, in fact, induce some forms of discrimination when social inequalities are overlooked. Therefore, equity could necessitate special measures to compensate for the disadvantages. Equity is an essential element to equality.

Gender is defined as the social meanings given to biological sex differences. It refers to the socially constructed roles held by women and men in a specific society, including their responsibilities, behaviours and attitudes towards each other. Even if they sometimes look natural, these roles are learned and could be different from one society to another and are changing over time.

Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women’s issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women.

Gender and social inclusion mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for women men and socially disadvantaged groups of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women and men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all

political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.

Minority. Any small group in society that is different from the rest because of their race, religion, or political beliefs, or a person who belongs to such a group. In the case of Solomon Islands, examples of groups that could be considered minorities are Polynesians and i-Kiribati (source: minorityrights.org/country/Solomon-islands/).

Persons with Disabilities (PWD). The term persons (or people) with disabilities is used to apply to all persons with disabilities including those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers, hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. It is also important to note that a person with disabilities may be regarded as a person with a disability in one society or setting, but not in another, depending on the role that the person is assumed to take in his or her community. The perception and reality of disability also depend on the technologies, assistance and services available, as well as on cultural considerations. Over 650 million people around the world live with disabilities. Persons with disabilities make up the world's largest and most disadvantaged minority.

Underrepresentation. Insufficient or disproportionately low representation of a subset of a population in comparison with the percentages of representation of other groups of the same population.

Social Inclusion. This is the process of improving the terms in which individuals and groups take part in society -improving the ability, opportunity and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity and circumstances. Disadvantage is often based on social identity, which may be derived from gender, age, location, occupation, race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship status, disability, and sexual orientation and gender identity, among other factors.

Temporary Special Measures (TSM). In accordance with article 4 of CEDAW, these are measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women. The use of the term 'measures' encompasses a wide variety of legislative, executive, administrative and other regulatory instruments, policies and practices, such as outreach or support programmes; allocation and/or reallocation of resources; preferential treatment; targeted recruitment, hiring and promotion; numerical goals connected with time frames; and quota systems. They are considered 'special' because they are designed to serve a specific goal and shall not be considered discrimination. Their nature is 'temporary' because they shall be discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved.



ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEO	Chief Electoral Officer
CRPD	Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
EVAWG	Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls (EVAWG)
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
GEWD	Gender Equality and Women's Development policy
PIFs	Pacific Islands Forum
PPA	Pacific Platform for Action for the Advancement of Women
PWD	Persons living With Disabilities
SIEC	Solomon Islands Electoral Commission
SIEO	Solomon Islands Electoral Office
SIG	Solomon Islands Government
TSM	Temporary Special Measures





Vote blo iu, Voice blo iu

The Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy development was supported by the Strengthening the Electoral Cycle in Solomon Islands Project (SECSIP) which is the collaboration between UNDP and the Australian Government