YOUNG AUSTRALIANS in
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

# E-SAFETY PROGRAM: EDUCATING, ENGAGING AND EMPOWERING YOUTH TO PREVENT TECHNOLOGICALLY-FACILITATED GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (TFGBV) IN AUSTRALIA, FIJI AND SOLOMON ISLANDS

2024 FUTURE LEADERS SERIES WINNING POLICY PITCH
DEVELOPED AND AUTHORED BY ISOBEL CARR, ABBY HIGGINS,
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the commencement of the 2024 Young Australians in International Affairs Future Leaders Series on Gender in Indo-Pacific Politics, our 28 participants were allocated into six groups in which to collaboratively develop five-minute policy pitches. During the final session of the Series, participants presented their group policy pitches, informed by the knowledge they gained throughout the program. In their proposals, they were asked to consider how young people could help drive the development of gender sensitive approaches to Australia's regional relationships.

The competition was judged by Ms Stephanie Copus Campbell AM - Australian Ambassador for Gender Equality, Ms Bec Strating - Director of La Trobe Asia and a Professor of International Relations at La Trobe University and Ms Radhika Behuria - Gender Specialist at the Asian Development Bank's Office of Markets Development and Public Private Partnership (OMDP).

Judges assessed the relevance, innovation, viability and presentation of their proposals to determine an overall winner.

The winning pitch, entitled *E-Safety Program: Educating, Engaging and Empowering Youth to Prevent Technologically-Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV) in Australia, Fiji and Solomon Islands,* was created and presented by Isobel Carr, Abby Higgins, Maria Joseph and Priya Virdee-Hero.

Together, these four young women planned and proposed the creation of a joint Australia, Fiji and Solomon Islands e-safety program that educates, engages, and empowers the next generation of leaders to prevent tech-based abuse - with a particular focus on the unique challenges that it currently poses for women, girls, and gender diverse people. This document is an extended textual version of their original video pitch.

# BACKGROUND

As of 2020, 85 per cent of women globally had experienced or witnessed online violence [1]. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) involves acts of violence enabled or amplified through information and communication technologies or digital media, against a person on the basis of their gender [2]. It can manifest in many forms, such as online harassment, cyberstalking, defamation and revenge porn, with advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) ushering a myriad of unique challenges. Young women and girls are at greater risk of directly experiencing TFGBV due to their age, gender identity, and higher level of internet and social media usage [3].

The rise and ongoing proliferation of TFGBV in the Indo-Pacific region has sparked many of its members to devise and implement various initiatives, both nationally and internationally, to mitigate and ultimately, eliminate the threat.

## AUSTRALIA

In Australia, the nation's e-Safety Commissioner was established as the primary institution to combat TFGBV. The Commissioner has implemented various initiatives such as awareness campaigns and community-based efforts, and in 2024, the Commissioner allocated AUD $3.5 million towards primary prevention projects [4, 5].

The borderless nature of TFGBV has encouraged Australia to additionally participate in regional engagements such as the Pacific Partnership to End Violence Against Women and Girls [6]. It has also undertaken joint initiatives with some of its like minded Pacific neighbours - including Fiji and Solomon Islands - to address the issue on a broader scale.

## FIJI

Fiji has taken a proactive approach to the fight against TFGBV, becoming a regional leader in this space and possessing one of the world's first online safety commissioners [7]. The main strategies implemented by Fiji include awareness campaigns, reporting mechanisms, and support services. Fiji has implemented an extensive digital literacy program in collaboration with ChildFund Australia

to launch the 'Swipe Safe Training Project', which delivers face-to-face cyber security training to staff, students and parents in schools across Fiji [8]. The nation is revamping its legal framework through partnerships with Australia's e-Safety Commissioner.

## SOLOMON ISLANDS

Solomon Islands attended the Pacific Cyber Safety Symposium in 2023. Following that conference, the Solomon Islands' delegation arranged for the new *TFGBV Training for Frontline Workers in the Pacific* training to be rolled out to their workforce, assisted by Australia's e-Safety Commissioner [9]. Although perhaps not yet a regional 'leader' like Australia and Fiji, Solomon Islands is clearly actively invested in eliminating TFGBV both independently and collaboratively.

# THE PROBLEM

TFGBV is becoming more widely recognised by key regional stakeholders, however Pacific states are still struggling to effectively manage this complex phenomenon which continues to disproportionately impact already vulnerable groups; namely women and youth.

For example, children in Solomon Islands identify cyberbullying and hacking on social media as their greatest online concerns, and believe that girls are at a higher risk of harm [10]. Similarly, as of September 2024, 65 per cent of online harassment reporting to Fiji's Online Safety Commission comes from women, four in ten of which identify a former intimate partner as the perpetrator [7]. Fiji's detection of this behaviour is complicated by the fact that many abusive posts are written in its Indigenous language, which is not algorithmically monitored by social media corporations [7]. Meanwhile, as of March 2022 in Australia, 75 per cent of complaints about online harm come from women and girls [11].

Currently, the confrontation of TFGBV in the Indo-Pacific remains hindered by a lack of genuine, effective engagement between its decision-makers and its youth. Young women and girls are among the most vulnerable to TFGBV, as their demographic constitutes a large proportion of social media users. Current policy approaches to TFGBV still do not prioritise the establishment of constructive two-way channels of engagement and mutual learning between current state and regional authorities, and these young women, girls and future leaders.

Indo-Pacific youth, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, lack sufficient access to digestible information about their online rights. They are further, by consequence of their age, largely denied access to vital decision-making spaces in which to share their experiences and pursue change. Equally, state and regional-level progress and innovation in tackling TFGBV remains stymied by their limited insight into the diverse manifestations and impacts of the issue on vulnerable peoples.

Once again, addressing the gendered ramifications of the above situation is a matter of particular concern to our regional future. In November 2024, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) warned that the rising risk of gendered online harassment could likely cause "fewer women to meaningfully engage in political discourse…effectively forcing women out of key decision-making spaces and processes [and] risking the regression of women's rights and freedom of speech." [12].

Overall, this widespread threat requires an accordingly collaborative and swift response. The Australian Government, as a strategic partner of the Pacific Partnership to End Violence Against Women and Girls, is uniquely positioned to push for more gender-aware action against technologically-based abuse in the region.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATION

The above problem can be addressed through creating a joint Australia, Fiji and Solomon Islands E-Safety program that educates, engages, and empowers the next generation of leaders to prevent TFGBV in innovative ways rooted in their own diverse experiences and knowledges. It is clear that Australia's e-Safety Commissioner already possesses strong bilateral relationships with Fiji and Solomon Islands, and is seeking to address far-reaching issues which reside at the intersection of gender, peace and cyber security. By capitalising on these strong connections, Australia can lead a multi-stakeholder approach to uplifting young people, facilitating cross-regional learning and accountability, and pursuing its Women, Peace and (Cyber)Security (WPS) priorities - engaging with governments, academics, teachers, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) where necessary to do so.

This program encapsulates two key sub-demographics of regional youth. The first, aged between 10-17, are at a crucial age wherein they are incredibly

exposed to technology and accompanying gender biases and harmful online materials. These individuals are undergoing primary or secondary education and could be vulnerable to witnessing or directly experiencing TFGBV at the hands of strangers or even their peers. The second sub-demographics is that of 18-25-year-old young people. These individuals are likely to be engaged in tertiary education and/or employment - in essence, be occupying new environments that present different and potentially greater dangers in relation to TFGBV. The threat and potential impacts of tech-based abuse at such a pivotal period in their academic and/or professional lives necessitate their education about and involvement in combatting TFGBV.

Given the above focal areas, a five-year E-Safety pilot program should be rolled out in schools and universities in its three member states to directly approach key target demographics. The five-year rollout will begin with a six-month consultation period, wherein member state government officials work closely with local educators, NGOs and other relevant experts, capitalising on their distinct knowledge bases and resources to co-design and tailor the program to their specific needs.

Within a year of the conclusion of the local stakeholder consultation period, at least one educational institution in each of the three participating states should launch their first iteration of the program. By the end of the following year, two schools and two universities should have implemented a version of the foundational E-Safety program, adapted to their local environment and participants. The remainder of the five-year launch period will focus on strengthening and expanding the program and its stakeholder network. The program will progressively scale up on an opt-in basis that builds on existing institutions. Member states can harness existing cross-border educational ties and forge new 'sister school/university' partnerships to encourage their entrance into the program.

The total cost of this five-year pilot program is estimated at AUD$500 000. Funding should be secured through governmental allocations and private sector partnerships, including tech companies. Forging partnerships with tech companies is particularly crucial to the success of the program, given their role in the rise of, and consequent responsibility for the prevention of, TFGBV.

Overall, the program is structured around three key pillars. The first is to educate young people about TFGBV, but also recognise that they are knowledge producers who have valuable ideas and experiences. The second is to engage young people in activities to talk with and learn from each other, especially across borders to promote regional cooperation. Finally and most importantly, the Australia-Fiji-Solomon Islands E-Safety program aims to empower young people, especially women and girls, to lead initiatives and research to create sustainable and transformative change.

# E-SAFETY PROGRAM: CORE PILLARS

**1**

**EDUCATE young people about TFGBV, but also recognise that they are knowledge producers who have valuable ideas and experiences**

Educating young people about TFGBV and the avenues of support available to those impacted will help member states to address present and future instances of tech-based abuse. To ensure the effective dissemination of information, values of accessibility, inclusivity and wellbeing reside at this educational program's method of delivery.

First, by launching the program at primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, member states will be better positioned to educate a wider portion of their respective youth populations at earlier stages in their online exposure while also acknowledging the current and more complex challenges that young adults face. Additionally, the E-Safety program will prioritise the design and widespread dissemination of

accessible, digestible and culturally and linguistically inclusive materials about TFGBV and its management. Furthermore, given the nature of the program's focus, all educational materials and activities will be subject to stringent ethical regulations, and centre on the protection of participant wellbeing. Finally, the program will be conducted in a fashion that recognises youth not as passive recipients but key actors and knowledge producers in the TFGBV prevention space, thereby embedding a two-way learning exchange into program operations.

Although the E-Safety program will be co-designed and co-delivered with its young participants, some of its core topics would include defining and recognising the various influences behind, manifestations of and harmful impacts caused by TFGBV. The delivery of this information should be adapted to certain subgroups to align with their circumstances and/or vulnerabilities. For example, Indigenous peoples often experience TFGBV differently and therefore may require different forms of support within their communities. Program participants would then engage in a two-way exploration with program partners and facilitators of methods through which to target the root causes and occurrences of TFGBV.

# E-SAFETY PROGRAM: CORE PILLARS

**2** **ENGAGE young people in activities to talk with and learn from each other, especially across borders to promote regional cooperation**

While the E-Safety program is designed to foster effective engagement between decision-makers and future leaders, it equally prioritises engagement among cohorts of youth participants themselves. This initiative is at its core characterised by regional collaboration, and as such, should seek to forge member state connections at every level of operation. Placing cross-cultural, cross-border communication at the heart of the program will further allow participants to harness their shared experiences, values and motivations - and appreciate and learn from their differences - to better understand and mitigate TFGBV.

To optimise the program's engagement with young people, guidance should be sought from Canada and South Africa's Networks4Change program.

In response to their shared problem of sexual violence against girls and young women, the program was launched in 2014 as an innovative solution that integrated research with participatory actions, interventions, and social change [13]. While not exclusively focused on TFGBV, Networks4Change nonetheless demonstrates the innate value of variety in program delivery. The combination of virtual and in-person domestic and regional activities at the heart of the program engaged a broad network of stakeholders and harnessed a range of different mediums to facilitate valuable and lasting connections at an interpersonal level among the region's future leaders [14]. Additionally, participants reported feeling more confident about addressing sexual violence and healing from adversity [15].

# E-SAFETY PROGRAM: CORE PILLARS

## 3 EMPOWER young people, especially women and girls, to lead initiatives and research to create sustainable and transformative change

In recognising youth as knowledge producers and valued agents in combatting TFGBV - and giving them key tools to help them navigate this complex issue - the E-Safety program can ultimately empower young people to lead grassroots research, advocacy and additional activities such as social media campaigns in this space. This capability is further strengthened by the multi-stakeholder nature of the program, which facilitates and maintains youth connections with member state policymakers. Consequently, young people can influence the development of local, national and even multilateral regulations, and ultimately create and lead sustainable and transformative change.

Evaluation is a central tool through which to gauge progress toward all three of the program's pillars. However, it is particularly useful for the empowerment pillar. Monitoring and evaluation will take place in both short, medium and long-term capacities in the form of post-program participant surveys, individual activity feedback mechanisms and TFGBV data collection. Each of these evaluatory tools can platform and assess the genuine inclusion of youth into ongoing decision-making processes regarding the mitigation of TFGBV.

# CONCLUSION

Technology facilitated gender based violence is a complex phenomenon which continues to disproportionately impact already vulnerable groups; namely women and youth. The effective confrontation of TFGBV in the Indo-Pacific remains hindered by a lack of genuine, effective engagement between its decision-makers and its youth. To rectify this critical gap, Australia, Fiji and Solomon Islands should jointly launch an E-safety program that educates, engages, and empowers the next generation of leaders to prevent TFGBV in innovative ways rooted in their own diverse experiences and knowledges.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

### Isobel Carr (she/her)

Isobel is an Industrial Officer at the SDA Newcastle and Northern Branch and is completing a Bachelor of Social Science (Politics and International Relations) and Bachelor of Laws. She is interested in the intersection between labour rights and international relations.

### Abby Higgins (she/her)

Abby is Head of Impact at Girls Run the World where she helps empower young women in the diplomatic and foreign policy community. She has completed a Master of International Law and Diplomacy at the Australian National University and a Bachelor of Arts Dual Degree at the University of Sydney and Sciences Po.

### Maria Joseph (she/her)

Maria is a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Laws undergraduate at Deakin University. She recently returned to Australia after living 13 months in various South Asian countries through the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan Scholarship.

### Priya Virdee-Hero (she/her)

Priya is a Bachelor of Laws (Honours) undergraduate at the Queensland University of Technology, and affects change through her various roles across the community supporting women and engaging in international relations spaces.

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