

Inspiring profile

Enly Saeni

by Enly Saeni and Sangeeta Mangubhai

Enly Labuinao Saeni is from Solomon Islands. He has a Master of Arts in Sociology from the University of Hawaii, and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of the South Pacific.

Enly Saeni worked at WorldFish from 2014 to 2016 as a community liaison officer responsible for developing and revisiting community action plans on sustainable farming practices, marine managed areas, and gender transformative approaches. Previously he worked for the Solomon Islands Red Cross Society in Auki in Malaita Province, helping people build resilient communities. He has a diversity of experience, including gender transformative approaches, research in development, community-based rehabilitation and human rights, child protection and climate change.

Why are interested in working on gender?

I was born and raised in a small village in To'abaita on Malaita Island, Solomon Islands where *kastom* is still strong, especially in terms of being a man or a woman, boy or a girl. My interest in gender came through my formal education and previous work for international organisations that strongly advocated for gender equality. This topic is generally less attractive to most men, but I decided to pursue this further in order to break that barrier.

What are some of the challenges you personally face as a male working on gender?

The biggest barrier is within myself, especially coming from a society where masculinity is valued and appreciated. Sometimes I felt low, especially hearing from my male friends that gender is a woman's topic. To completely exclude my manhood, *kastom*, and culture is near impossible.

What are some of the challenges of promoting or applying gender equality in Solomon Islands?

Most said *kastom* and culture is the main challenge. For me, one of the key challenges is how the topic is communicated and targeted to the local Solomon Island contexts. This means getting a basic understanding of place, *kastom* and cultures before gender equality is integrated into the local context. The general perspective in Solomon Islands is that women and men, and boys and girls are not always equal. How to discuss gender equality with that strong perspective is challenging. I find that instead of saying "gender equality", it is much more effective to say that women and men are different; however, women and men exist based on "mutual relationships" where they support each other in all walks of



life. This is a value that is traditionally rooted in Solomon Islands *kastom*, where tribes and families, men and women mutually support and help each other when the need arises. This is how gender should be integrated into local communities in Solomon Islands. In other words, using the local *kastom* to promote gender.

What advice do you have for women working on gender, to better engage men?

First women and men need to understand cultural-context specific cases, where they are coming from, and their position as women and men in the wider society. It is better to use existing stories and values that promote women such as "women are powerful, their power lies within them, they bear the next and future generations, in the midst of conflict women showed up, they face challenges, and they do not run away, they are the pillars of the society." Stories about women heroes exist in all cultures. These kinds of stories and values needs to be promoted by women to convince men. Stories about a woman who loved her husband and children and tribe, and sold to another tribe for the sake of saving her menfolk do exist. These stories and values exist but are not told enough. In a society like Solomon Islands, a simple but effective approach for women and men working on gender is to use and build on these existing stories. Show and prove it to men that women are capable.

What advice would you give men who are thinking about working on gender?

Gender is not a "women's thing" or "women's topic". Gender is a topic that is widely taught in universities and schools around the world. I encourage more men to try working on topics or do research on gender. It is one way of getting men on board with a deeper understanding of the issue. Western discourse of gender and traditional perspectives on gender may differ. However, it is good to look beyond what we are taught, question things, and improve what needs to be improved in order to establish a relationship that is just and fair with a positive mindset and attitude towards more inclusive development at all levels - family, community, national and international.