



Economic empowerment of women in the Pacific Islands

Recommendations from the 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women and Fifth Pacific Women's Ministerial Meeting

(Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 20–25 October 2013)

From 20 to 24 October 2013, more than 200 people met in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, to discuss how commitments towards gender equality in the region have progressed. The overall aim of the conference was to bring together government ministers and senior decision makers, development partners, research institutions and civil society organisations to review and develop strategies for accelerating progress in the achievement of gender equality and women's human rights in our region. This is in line with *The Revised Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality 2005 to 2015* and other regional commitments on gender equality, including most recently the *Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration* of 2012.

12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women

With the theme of 'Celebrating our Progress, Shaping our World', the 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women was the biggest on record. It was convened by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and hosted by the Government of Cook Islands and included representatives of 21 SPC member countries and territories.

There are areas of progress in achieving women's human rights and gender equality in Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). More countries have adopted laws to protect women and children against domestic violence; there is a better understanding of the need to integrate a gender perspective across all sectors of development; there are new initiatives promoting women's political leadership; overall, women's health and access to education are improving; and their contribution to national economies has started to be recognised. However, there is still a long road to travel before Pacific Island women have all their human rights protected, benefit equally from development outcomes, and can fulfil their aspirations.

The 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women made a number of recommendations regarding the priority areas to progress gender equality in the region, notably in the sector of education. This brief presents the regional overview on mechanisms for the advancement of women and gender equality and the recommendations made by the Conference.



Economic Empowerment of Women

2013 Regional Overview

KEY GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES IN THE REGION

While there is evidence of progress for women in the Pacific, for example, in access to education, this has not yet translated into significant improvements in economic opportunity. Women's labour force participation rates in the region are low, with significant disparity recorded in Solomon Islands, Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and Samoa where men's participation rate is almost double that of women's. Legal and other barriers to economic empowerment are common. In Tonga, there has been some progress towards gender equality through the recent passing of the Family Protection Bill 2013. However, there are still barriers to economic empowerment; for example, the average woman can expect to receive 13 years of education but cannot own property. Similarly, in Samoa, 98 per cent of women are literate, but the financial infrastructure is poor and access to bank accounts and credit is limited.¹ In Fiji, only 19% of businesses are registered to women and most of those are micro and small businesses. Women's disadvantage can also stem from cultural and religious norms, the traditional division of labour, and failure of policy to deliver and fund services that work as well for women as they do for men. Gaps in access to financial services and safe and productive employment persist at great cost to women and their families as well as to national economies.

Women's economic empowerment is considered to be a key driver of sustainable economic development. Research demonstrates that there is a business case for the private sector to not only ensure non-discrimination in hiring and promoting women and giving them loans, but also to proactively seek opportunities to support women as employees, managers, and entrepreneurs. The primary resource required is political will and sustained support for Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) to implement initiatives. Technical assistance and resources should be provided and encouraged to achieve key outcomes. Different capacities and resource availability for achieving long-term goals in PICTs, in particular in small island states, should be acknowledged in working to improve economic empowerment amongst women.

¹ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). *Addressing Inequalities: The Case of Small Island Developing States in the Pacific* (2012) <<http://www.worldwewant2015.org/node/291977>> at 26 September 2013.

INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS ISSUES

Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration 2012

In 2012, the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration brought new commitment to empowering women to be active participants in economic, political and social life. In the area of women's economic empowerment, the Declaration specifically committed Leaders to:

- ❖ Remove barriers to women's employment and participation in the formal and informal sectors, including in relation to legislation that directly or indirectly limits women's access to employment opportunities or contributes to discriminatory pay and conditions for women
- ❖ Implement equal employment opportunity and gender equality measures in public sector employment, including State Owned Enterprises and statutory boards, to increase the proportion of women employed, including in senior positions, and advocate for a similar approach in private sector agencies
- ❖ Improve the facilities and governance of local produce markets, including fair and transparent local regulation and taxation policies, so that market operations increase profitability and efficiency and encourage women's safe, fair and equal participation in local economies
- ❖ Target support towards women entrepreneurs in the formal and informal sectors, for example, financial services, information and training, and review legislation that limits women's access to finance, assets, land and productive resources.

Following the adoption of the Forum Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, the then Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, announced a 10 year AUD 320 million dollar initiative to improve political, economic and social opportunities for women. A key component of the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (PWSPD) programme is that of increasing economic opportunities for women through improved access to financial services and markets. Thus far PWSPD has supported the development of PWSPD Country Plans, with clear expected outcomes and resource support for Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Similar plans are expected to be developed in other Forum island countries.

FEMM Action Plan

Forum Economic Ministers, at their 2012 meeting, reiterated the vital role of women in the economic development of member countries and the urgent need to improve women's participation in economic activities and development. They adopted a FEMM Action Plan with specific priorities for women's economic empowerment. The priorities focus on: improving women's employment and participation in the formal and informal sectors; increasing women's access to finance, business ownership and markets; improving women's right to safe, fair and equal participation in local economies; and improving access to and use of sex disaggregated data.

In 2013, Ministers reaffirmed these commitments and supported the proposal for a Leaders Gender Equality Declaration Reporting Framework with indicators to measure progress. They also supported research to study the economic costs of violence and related policy and legislative reforms; encouraged the development and use of sex disaggregated data on women's economic empowerment; and called for the implementation of legislation that reduces discriminatory practices at national level, for example in regard to pay and conditions for women, sexual harassment, and limitations to women's overall participation in the economy.

Reporting National Progress on Women's Economic Empowerment

A Reporting Framework with progress indicators has been developed by PIFS with the support of SPC to assist Forum member countries report progress against the commitments in the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration. It contains specific measures on women's economic empowerment and can also be used by Forum Economic Ministers to measure progress on FEMM's commitments in this area. The indicators are:

- ❖ Basic needs poverty rate (sex disaggregated)
- ❖ Labour force participation: ratio of women to men
- ❖ National retirement scheme: ratio of women to men
- ❖ Share of women in paid employment in the non agricultural sector: percentage
- ❖ Ratio of women's average wage to men's average wage.

The 2013 Progress Report on the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration noted that, overall, reliable data for measuring women's economic empowerment are weak, and referenced the Women's Economic Opportunity Index data on six countries – Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Most of these countries scored well on access to education and citizenship rights. However, they were particularly weak on property ownership, access to finance and implementation and enforcement of labour conventions on equal pay for equal work. The data and Progress Report will be publicly available on the PIFS website.

Removing Barriers to Women's Employment and Economic Participation

Cook Islands passed the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012, which aims to improve and promote equality for both women and men in the workplace, including through maternity leave provisions. In March 2013, the Samoan Government passed the Labour and Employment Relations Act prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace. Kiribati, Samoa, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu are progressing labour law reform with technical support from the International Labour Organization (ILO). A recent project in Tonga worked to finalise their draft Employment Relations Bill. The aim of the bill is to provide the legal framework for promoting workplace employment relations, protection for the rights and welfare of employees, and investment to safeguard increasing opportunities for employment, contributing to women's employment and economic participation.

The Forum Secretariat is exploring opportunities to collaborate with ILO and UN Women to support labour reform in small island states in response to Women's Economic Empowerment Plans for RMI and Nauru. A concept note is being developed in consultation between ILO and UN Women for extended work in small island states on 'Addressing legislative and policy barriers to women's economic rights'. More recently, UN Women collaborated with SPC and PIFS to partner on a pilot project in Cook Islands to support craft development, provide marketing tools and strengthen market access capabilities for women involved in the pearl industry.

RMI and Nauru have produced Women's Economic Empowerment Plans with support from the Forum Secretariat through UN Women (Small Island States Catalyst Funds). There are plans for similar women's economic empowerment mainstreaming and policy development projects to be implemented in remaining small island states by the Forum Secretariat.

In response to the mandate set by the 2012 FEMM to improve the enabling environment for women's economic participation, a state owned enterprise (SOE) survey was conducted in Cook Islands, RMI, Palau, Niue, Tuvalu, Tonga and Fiji and preliminary results presented at the 2013 FEMM. Apart from providing

an indication of the proportion of females participating in SOE, it also examines the enabling components of securing women's participation and leadership on public sector boards. Country findings will help policy makers tailor solutions to improve, and provide enabling conditions for, increased women's participation in and appointments to SOE boards and other similar positions. Economic Ministers have supported the extension of this SOE survey to all Forum island countries and a full report is to be completed by the end of this year.

The private sector can also play a role in improving employment opportunities for women. The International Finance Corporation's (IFC) WINvest programme brings together private sector partners and clients to substantiate and share lessons on the business case for improving working conditions and employment opportunities for women. Evidence for the business case, and practical advice to companies on how to improve employment for women, will be more widely disseminated to private sector actors in the region.

Women's access to financial services, business ownerships and markets

The Papua New Guinea (PNG) government is removing barriers to safe financial services through banks and microfinance institutions and improved financial infrastructure. Such initiatives are supported by ADB's Private Sector Development Initiative, IFC, and co-financed by Australia. IFC is currently scaling up its mobile banking and financial literacy program beyond PNG to Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands – a region where fewer than 15% of adults have bank accounts. A gender neutral business start-up guide and gender microfinance strategies for IFC financial institution clients in Pacific Islands are also under development.

PNG, Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Tonga and Solomon Islands are introducing a more robust, secure and cheaper mode of payment and transfers, improving the ability of women entrepreneurs and business owners to save and invest, supported by IFC.

Women's right to safe, fair and equal participation in local economies

Fiji, Solomon Islands, PNG and Vanuatu have begun improving local market infrastructure, which includes better security for women in the market vicinity. This work is supported by UN Women, UNDP, and the aid programmes of Australia and New Zealand.

The Forum Secretariat and Forum Reference Group to Address Sexual and Gender Based Violence have commissioned research to determine the economic costs to national economies, communities and families of women being affected by violence in the Pacific. This includes loss of productivity, costs of services to victims and their families, policing and judicial costs.

The main challenge in improving women's economic participation is lack of political will to implement results-oriented empowerment policies.





Recommendations from the 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women

Women's economic empowerment is part of the *Revised Pacific Platform for Action*, the Forum Economic Ministers' Meeting action plans 2012 and 2013 and the *Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration*. Women face barriers to employment and economic empowerment and they do not have equal access to financial services, business ownership and markets, nor the right to safe, fair and equal participation in local economies.

The conference:

1. Urged governments to act and report on their commitments to women's economic empowerment as outlined in the *Revised Pacific Platform for Action*, the Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM) 2012 and 2013 action plans, and the *Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration*.
2. Supported the development and use of sex-disaggregated data on women's economic empowerment.
3. Called for all PICTs to review the implementation of national employment legislation and policies, to promote decent work, to remove discriminatory practices and pay, and to eliminate sexual harassment that limits women's overall participation in the economy.
4. Supported and welcomed initiatives that improve the efficiency, productivity and safety of local markets and encourage national ownership by PICTs' governments.
5. Encouraged state-owned and private enterprises to improve and expand women's employment opportunities, and to promote, equitably, women to leadership positions.
6. Called on governments, the private sector and financial institutions to invest in and support women and young women, including those with disabilities, women living in rural and remote areas, and working in the informal sector, by:



- a) giving access to productive resources;
 - b) establishing business incubators;
 - c) promoting financial literacy programmes and access to financial services (noting potential negative risks associated with credit programmes); and
 - d) guaranteeing safe and sanitary conditions.
7. Called on PICTs to secure food sovereignty based on the recognition of smallholder farmers, particularly women, as key economic actors whose sovereign right to use and own land should be protected through legally binding safeguards, including against land grabbing.
 8. Urged governments to provide economic incentives for the private, not-for-profit, and state sectors to train and employ young women.
 9. Called on governments and the private sector to provide good quality, accessible and affordable childcare as a critical driver of women's economic empowerment and economic development.
 10. Urged FEMM to identify investment opportunities for women's employment and women SMEs and entrepreneurs in all regional and national tourism strategies and plans, and called on PICTs with support from development partners to invest in these areas.
 11. Called on governments and development partners to ensure that all environmental and social impact assessments of extractive industries, which disproportionately affect women and children, include a rigorous gender analysis to identify and mitigate against economic, social, cultural and environmental risks.

Recommendations from the Fifth Pacific Women's Ministerial Meeting

At the Fifth Pacific Women's Ministerial Meeting held in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, following the 12th Triennial Conference, from 24 to 25 October 2013, Ministers;

- ❖ acknowledged the importance of temporary labour migration to Pacific Island economies and its recent increase. Labour migration contributes to economic empowerment but the ministers recognised the need to explore both positive and negative impacts of temporary labour migration. Ministers also recognised the need to review temporary labour migration schemes between countries to ensure they support the advancement of gender equality.
- ❖ recognised the importance of cultural industries to Pacific women and called for an enabling environment to support greater access to markets.

February 2014

For further information contact Brigitte Leduc, Gender Equality Adviser, SPC (brigitte@spc.int)

