



Elimination of Violence against 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 which included more than 200 women was the biggest on record and included representatives of 21 SPC member countries and territories. The conference was convened by the Secretariat of the Pacific Islands (SPC) and hosted by the government of Cook Islands.

There are areas of progress in achieving women's human rights and gender equality in Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). More and 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 women's access to education are improving; and women's 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 for progressing gender equality in the region.

This brief presents the regional overview on the elimination of violence against women and the recommendations made by the Conference in its outcomes document.



Elimination of Violence against Women

2013 Regional Overview

KEY GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES IN THE REGION

Violence against women and girls has serious and wide-reaching consequences for individuals, families, communities and countries as a whole. VAW in the Pacific is recognised as a violation of human rights, a challenge to economic and social development, and a threat to human security. Pacific leaders are paying more attention to measures to end VAW throughout the region. PICTs that have now completed VAW prevalence studies have paved the way for a much deeper understanding of the issue in these countries. In addition, these studies have allowed a more nuanced understanding of the issue through in-depth analysis of prevalence data in each country. Comparisons between data sets from different countries show that the types of violence women experience vary considerably.

Studies have shown clear links between childhood and adult experiences of violence. Childhood violence puts both girls and boys at greater risk of either using violence or becoming victims of it later in life. This knowledge can inform programming aimed at breaking the cycle of violence by including work with young children, parents and communities to promote gender equitable attitudes and practices from very young ages. Pacific VAW studies also show that the majority of women who experience VAW do not seek help from services such as the police, health, social welfare, counsellors and the justice system. Better information may help to improve services for survivors of VAW and also reach women who feel silenced.

With this greater understanding of VAW and improvements in policy, legislation, programming and preventive action, attention has turned to specific settings and populations as keys to prevention and response actions. Examples include the increased engagement of youth in prevention strategies, the specific focus on the links between VAW and people living with disabilities, and the intertwined relationship between VAW and HIV. In all cases, the need for multi-sectoral responses in prevention and services has been affirmed. Prevention of violence has gained increased prominence. There are several ongoing and new initiatives to work with men and boys in communities, faith-based organisations, the workplace and in sport, in partnership with women's organisations. In addition, VAW has become a leading concern in considering gendered responses to the cross-cutting issue of climate change-related disasters in the Pacific region.

To address VAW, it is necessary to adopt, review, and ensure the effective implementation of laws and comprehensive measures that criminalise violence against women and girls. Enacting legislation that provides for comprehensive multidisciplinary and gender-sensitive preventive and protective measures – such as emergency barring and protection orders and appropriate punishment of perpetrators – is essential.

VAW must also be adequately represented in the post-2015 agenda, with particular focus on three areas that address inter-related dimensions of gender inequality:

Debilitating fear or experience of violence – due to the great physical and psychological harm to women and girls, VAW is a violation of human rights, constrains their ability to fulfill their true potential and carries great economic costs for the individual and society. A resolve to eliminate violence must be a prerequisite for any development agenda.

Skewed distribution of capabilities – e.g. knowledge, good health, and sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, as well as gender inequality in access to resources and opportunities, needs to be addressed urgently. These are the basic foundations for sustainable development and realisation of human rights.

Low number of women in public decision-making in institutions from national parliaments to local councils – the lack of women's voices in decision-making is noted, in particular in key institutions influencing public opinion and promoting accountability, such as the media and civil society. This lack is also found in private-sector institutions, such as in the management and governance of companies, and it has its roots in unequal power relations in the family and community.

Together, these three dimensions affect the safety, economic and social security of women and girls and their voices in shaping public policy priorities. All must be considered in a renewed development agenda to address VAW.

UPDATE ON NEW AND ONGOING INITIATIVES

At the 2010 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting, heads of government acknowledged the initiative of the Forum Regional Security Committee to establish a Reference Group on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, and endorsed the creation of the mechanism to take forward the mandate from Leaders in 2009: that sexual and gender-based violence was a risk to human security and a destabilising factor for communities. Pacific Islands Forum Leaders mandated the reference group to raise awareness of the seriousness of sexual and gender-based violence and its impact on the Pacific. The reference group is an independent high-level group of experts, established to guide the Forum Secretariat and support Forum members' efforts to implement the Leaders' decision to address sexual and gender-based violence in the region. Part of the work of the group is to consider options for costing the far-reaching economic and social impact of VAW on individuals and governments, and also to consider implementation of laws, and policies to assist in allocating resources for essential services and initiatives to prevent violence.

In 2012, Leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum again committed to efforts to lift the status of women in the Pacific and support their active participation in economic, political and social life. Leaders expressed concern that, despite some positive initiatives to address violence against women, overall progress in the region towards gender equality is slow, and violence against women remains high. To realise this goal, Leaders committed with renewed energy to implement the gender equality actions of the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Millennium Development Goals, the Revised Pacific Platform for Action on the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality (2005 to 2015), the Pacific Plan and the 40th Pacific Islands Forum commitment to eradicate sexual and gender-based violence. Specific actions to address VAW were outlined, including progressively implementing a package of essential services (protection, health, counselling, legal advice) for women and girls who are survivors of violence, and enacting and implementing legislation on sexual and gender-based violence to protect women and impose appropriate penalties for perpetrators of violence.

In 2012, the governments of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands invited the UN Special Rapporteur on 'violence against women, its causes and consequences' for official country visits. Her official reports, released in 2013, presented findings and specific recommendations for each country. Both governments are taking action to address the recommendations in the reports. In addition, in 2013 the UN Rapporteur released a report on state responsibility for the elimination of VAW. States and civil society organisations can use the report as a tool for advocacy and implementation. It underscores the importance for states of addressing the need of individuals for appropriate responses and justice, and the need to establish functional systems for response, prevention and accountability.

In 2013, at the 44th Pacific Islands Forum, Leaders acknowledged the progress that had been made towards the Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration. Several PICTs have enacted national legislation on the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and legislation specific to various types of VAW. Leaders also acknowledged the Pacific Islands Forum Reference Group to Address Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and reiterated that sexual and gender-based violence is not to be tolerated. They also acknowledged the important role of police and community agencies.

In 2013, Pacific governments and civil society representatives were closely involved with negotiations on developing the Agreed Conclusions during the Commission on the Status of Women. States are now using the Agreed Conclusions as a new guide for preventing and eliminating violence against women. In July 2012, parliamentarians joining in a regional human rights consultation hosted by SPC's Regional Rights Resource Team, issued the Participating Pacific Members of Parliament UNITE Statement. The statement affirmed a strong commitment to preventing and responding to violence against women, children and persons with a disability, and was aligned with the UN Secretary General's UNITE campaign to end violence against women.

Some Pacific governments, such as Kiribati and Solomon Islands, have developed policies to address gender-based violence and have adopted national action plans. These plans provide a framework of priority actions for implementation, resourcing and monitoring, and can be used by both government and development partners to provide support and monitor progress. It is critical that all of the relevant partners, including government agencies and civil society organisations, are engaged in this process. Adequate resourcing is key.

New research by the UN, released in September this year, has shown that 23 per cent of men who were interviewed about sexual violence against women admitted to committing at least one rape. The UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific interviewed over 10,000 men in six countries in Asia and the Pacific. The findings reveal feelings of sexual entitlement, or notions that a man has the right to have sex with a woman whether or not she consents. In Bougainville, 62 per cent of men admitted to forcing a woman to have sex. Of these, just under half had committed this crime more than once. Men who had themselves suffered violence as a child were more likely to commit rape and partner violence. More than half of those who committed non-partner rape first did so as adolescents (19 years of age or younger). This points to the importance of engaging young people in prevention of rape, before that first act is committed.

PICTs are developing new and improved ways of responding to VAW in a more coordinated and survivor-centered manner. Referral networks and systems that are more comprehensive and engage more providers are gaining prominence. Service providers are continuing to develop ways of ensuring that survivors get more direct access to help by setting up hotlines and monitoring referrals to other agencies. Providers are collecting more detailed data about survivors and cross-checking some of that information with other agencies to better target and improve services, as is the case in Kiribati and Solomon Islands.

Across the region there have also been improvements in addressing VAW through legislation. Please refer to Agenda Item 3: Overview Paper on Women's Legal and Human Rights for a list of key achievements on VAW legislation. Whilst there has been progress, the absence of comprehensive legislation that adequately addresses all forms of VAW is noted, and further reform is also required to ensure adequate redress for women in situations of violence. Additionally, where countries have not revised their legislation, gender-based violence is not recognised as a specific crime. The challenges ahead are to ensure that newly enacted legislation is resourced, implemented and monitored.

There is still much work to be done in addressing VAW. For the majority of women survivors of violence, access to services is still out of reach. Skilled providers of high quality, sensitive, confidential services are needed across sectors: health, social welfare, police, justice and education. Each of these service providers need specific guidelines to deliver responses to survivors of VAW, responses that are developed in collaboration with survivors of VAW as the experts and that are consistently enforced and monitored. Service providers must work with each other; no one service can solve the problem alone. Women's access to justice remains very limited, particularly to formal justice systems. Women who experience violence need impartial and fair treatment by all protection and justice actors, who take violence very seriously and act immediately to protect the woman and her family. Systems for government accountability are needed to ensure that commitments are fulfilled in a progressive manner. Various government departments can assist by holding each other accountable, with support from civil society. Increased attention to preventing violence before it starts is essential to interrupt the cycle of violence and create future generations that live without the fear and consequences of violence. And finally, the cultivation of a supportive, non-blaming environment for survivors of VAW is essential to allow women to break their silence about violence and receive the help they deserve. Responsibility for violence must be placed where it belongs: with the perpetrators.



Recommendations from the 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women

The conference:

1. Recognising the high prevalence rates of violence against women, young women and girls, including those with disabilities, and the impact of gambling, drug and substance abuse on increasing violence, the conference called for urgent and increased investment in policies, programmes, research and legislative reforms that provide services and support, including access to rights and justice.
2. Commended the regional advocacy work conducted by the Pacific Islands Forum Reference Group to Address Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), supported their proposal to conduct national studies on the economic impacts of SGBV, and requested dissemination of the findings to all PICTs on completion.
3. Called for PICTs and development partners to support research regarding social and economic impacts of all forms of violence against women/SGBV, including sorcery-related violence.
4. Acknowledged the need to ensure that discrimination faced by women, young women, and girls with disabilities and their particular vulnerability to Sexual and Gender Based Violence and poverty be recognised in line with CEDAW and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), and supported evidence-based studies by PICTs (with the support of development partners) to improve knowledge and data on women with disabilities for improved policy and programming.



5. Called for the elimination of SGBV and violence against women, young women and girls, including those with disabilities, and those in rural and remote locations, and for this:
 - a) to be included in national development strategies, plans and public financing mechanisms; and
 - b) to be adequately resourced through clearly identifiable budget allocations, expenditure and human resources.
6. Supported access to justice for survivors of violence by the adoption of national legislation, effective legal assistance, and just and effective remedies, which involve both the formal and the non-formal (or traditional) justice systems to be addressed through the development and coordinated implementation of effective multi-sectoral national policies, strategies and programmes that include measures for prevention, protection and support services, and monitoring and evaluation.
7. Supported the engagement of adolescents and youth as strategic groups for ending the cycle of violence through the implementation of educational programmes, based on gender equality and human rights.
8. Called for the post-2015 development agenda to adopt a transformative stand-alone goal to achieve gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment, structured around several target areas: freedom from violence, gender equality in capabilities and resources, gender equality in decision-making power, and a voice in public and private institutions.
9. Called for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to be guaranteed, ensuring that women, young women, and girls, including those with disabilities, receive comprehensive and confidential SRHR services that respect their human rights throughout their life cycle.

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 24-25 of October 2013, the Ministers;

- ❖ noted the increased incidence and reporting of sorcery-related violence, including murder, against women in some PICTs. The ministers also recognised the need to establish measures to eliminate sexual and gender-based violence, including sorcery-related violence, and to address its causes, consequences and impacts in compliance with human rights frameworks.
- ❖ recognised the high prevalence rates of violence against women, young women and girls, including those with disabilities, and the impact of gambling, drug and substance abuse on increasing violence and on sexual reproductive health and rights, and called for urgent and increased investment in policies, programmes, research and legislative reforms that provide services and support, including access to rights and justice.
- ❖ recognised the threat of human trafficking and urged regional cooperation between governments and relevant stakeholders to take immediate national action to eliminate it by developing and implementing legislation, protection mechanisms, and appropriate support services.

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