

**Report to the Cook Islands Chamber of Commerce on the
Conference of the Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO).
Pacific Women in Business (Building women entrepreneurs – Building nations)
26-28 November 2014, Nadi, Fiji**

On behalf of my Cook Islands colleagues, Teuira (Tutu) Pirangi from Highland Paradise and Andrea Rongokea of Wedded Bliss, I would like to thank the Chamber of Commerce for enabling us to attend the second PIPSO conference held in Fiji. Many thanks too, to Lynne Samuel for her patient assistance and support with the logistical arrangements.

The experience was not only an eye-opener to the many successful businesses across the Pacific but also a realisation that despite the difficulties women in the Cook Islands may experience getting started and maintaining their businesses due to the constraints of some of our government and private sector financial or capacity building policies, our environment for entrepreneurship is much more facilitating than that of some of our sisters in other Pacific countries. Vast distances between women's networks for some and the lack of quality internet connectivity for many, may limit important contact and support among women entrepreneurs. However, a common barrier to sustainable development of business ventures in many countries across the Pacific is the lack of access to financial services alongside appropriate education and training that will assist them to be successful and sustainable.

Pacific Chambers of Commerce were recognised at the conference for the practical support they give for local businesses. The Gender Equality Project would like to take further advantage of the knowledge and experience of its own local Chamber members to build the businesses of our women entrepreneurs, even to our micro-to-small businesses at the market level.

Violence against women, by both men and other women across the Pacific, was also identified as a barrier to the greater contribution that could be made by women in business. These issues were discussed in a dialogue facilitated by the Australian Government's Ambassador for Women and Girls, Natasha Stott Despoja, on the day before the PIPSO conference. Support was sought for solutions from within the private sector to respond to the costs that can result from violence against women. These costs can directly impact on loss of productivity and service provision for businesses but also on police, health and justice systems, as well as loss of security and income for families.

Examples were given about how various Pacific private sector companies were supporting women employees who were experiencing violence in the home. A Pacific study is currently being undertaken as to how the private sector is responding to this major societal challenge. I would urge the Chamber to publicly support any community efforts that will help to eliminate domestic violence so that women can more positively contribute to the economic development of our country.

While the conference provided a wide overview of Pacific businesses, we felt that the coverage did not include much from the hospitality or service industries that would be of high interest to countries where tourism is their major income earner. Highland Paradise and Wedded Bliss would have provided unique sights into traditional and cultural inputs can add value to services within a tourism-oriented economy. Jennifer Henry's entertaining presentation about Te Tika and its respect for traditional and scientific contexts was a much appreciated perspective. Marian Gosselin attended as a representative of Cook Islands Westpac. Westpac Bank was the conference's Gold Sponsor.

In the next month, the Gender Project aims to seek out established companies who have an innovative idea that would add value to their current products or services, to make an application for support from the Project. These companies would be potential contributors to the next PIPSO conference which is due to be

held in 2016, however a preview would be possible in a Women's Business Forum that the Project proposes to hold in May-June 2015. Assistance at this event from the Chamber would be gratefully appreciated.

Identified Challenges for Women in Business across the Pacific

- Internet connectivity and related costs across the Pacific identified as being a major barrier for making contacts with overseas markets
- Access to financial services and start-up loans by women when financial institutions impose such high hurdles with regards to security required as collateral.
- Violence against women issues as mentioned earlier.
- The need for a Ministry of Women in each of the Pacific countries to appropriately deal with national issues as they affect women.
- It was recommended that women business entrepreneurs from the Pacific attend whatever opportunities available to lobby for the resolutions that have come out of this conference. One venue mentioned was the Pacific Forum Economic Ministers meeting will be held on Rarotonga in 2015.

Positive Takeaways from the PIPSO Conference

- Master chef, Robert Oliver, promoted the local agriculture industry. His books demonstrate that Pacific cuisine can be healthy, especially when enhanced by quality local produce. Markets such as Punanga Nui create opportunities for small farmers but education and training in effective business management for microbusinesses are essential to ensure that these operations are effective and sustainable, especially when these provide the main income for many stallholder operators.
- The conference recommended that Governments should add more tax to unhealthy imported foods and decrease the tax on home grown foods, and encourage women in agriculture.
- Bernadette Ganilau's message to the women at the close of the conference was to keep agitating for change in government and private sector policy to encourage and facilitate an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs.

Followup for the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Project

- PIPSO and PIPSO members will be incorporated into the training and development programme for the project
- Pacific-based trainers from among the PIPSO members have been identified for mentoring, marketing, branding, handicraft production, networking and other training.
- One of the important aspects of training for this Project is to utilise the skills and experience of people who have worked in the private sector industry in the Pacific, and who know what is important for Pacific women entrepreneurs to understand in order for them to be successful.
- The Gender Project seeks Chamber support to help to address the needs of women who experience violence in the home and which would adversely impact on their employment, their employability or their potential for creating their own business.

With many thanks

Maureen Hilyard, Tutu Pirangi and Andrea Rongokea.

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