



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM SECRETARIAT

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FORUM ECONOMIC OFFICIALS MEETING

FORUM ECONOMIC MINISTERS MEETING

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Port Vila, Vanuatu

INFORMATION PAPER 3: ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Purpose and Recommendations

Purpose

This paper provides an update on the progress, challenges and planned actions to support women's economic empowerment in the Pacific including linkages to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, the revitalisation of the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED), the development of the Blue Pacific Economic Strategy (BPES).

Summary

Women's economic empowerment is a powerful lever for change. It can drive gender equality and intergenerational benefits for women, their families, and countries. Transformative change, from economic participation to economic power means that women have equal opportunity with men to control income and assets, access decent and secure work, receive social protection, control their time, and have equal consideration and participation in economic decision-making. Without consideration for the power dynamics within women's homes and communities, economic development initiatives can reinforce or even exacerbate existing inequalities.

Pacific women have a key role to play in recovery and economic development. Communities and economies work better when the barriers to the participation of women and girls are removed, enabling all to have an equal place in national life. This is reaffirmed in the approach to the revitalisation of the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED) to support the vision of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, recognising the critical role that women and girls, in all their diversity, play in our region and the need for effective coordination and collaboration to support and strengthen gender equality.

A. Overview/Summary

Women play a central role in Pacific economies and contribute to both the formal and informal sectors yet continue to face workplace discrimination, much higher unpaid labour burdens, financial abuse, and a lack of equity at many levels of economic decision-making.

2. The gap in earnings between women and men persists across all forms of economic activity and workplace rights and policies (such as equal pay and parental leave) are slow to progress in many countries, highlighting that women’s economic participation does not necessarily equate to their own economic empowerment.

3. Economics assumes women and men make decisions in the same way and that they react to economic stimuli in the same way, but this is far from true. It is important to include women’s perspectives and experiences in developing policies and creating laws to support and strengthen transformative approaches across the region to facilitate change. Leadership capacity building, gender-responsive economic policies and actions, family-based approaches, and targeted investment in grant mechanisms for flexible funding pave the way for a transformative impact on the livelihoods of communities, with women at the forefront.

4. All actions occurring across the region are crucial to addressing gender inequalities. The PIF Women Leaders Meeting (PIFWLM), endorsed by Leaders in 2021, provides a continuous focus on the critical role gender has on issues in the Pacific¹ including contributions to COVID-19 socio-economic recovery strategies, working towards the Sustainable Development Goals, and the achievement of the vision and ambitions of the 2050 Strategy including links to the Blue Pacific Economic Strategy currently under development.

B. Discussion

WEE in the Pacific context

5. Women’s economic empowerment means that women and men have equal opportunities to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from economic resources and activities. Yet, in the Pacific, women’s economic empowerment in the region has seen stunted progress. Pacific women face additional systemic, legal, and institutional barriers that prevent their potential to boost inclusive, economic growth from being fully realized.

6. Traditional gender norms mean that women and girls bear disproportionate responsibility for domestic and care work, limiting their ability to engage in the paid workforce, which is predominantly male. Women are disproportionately engaged in vulnerable employment and impacted by economic hardship, especially if they are experiencing intimate partner violence, the lifetime prevalence of which is 47% averaged across Pacific Island countries,² compared to the global average of 20% in 2021.³

Strengthening women’s economic empowerment – aligning to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent

7. Despite the current range of initiatives in the Pacific, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent recognises that there is a need to address issues of exclusion and inequality, including gender inequality. The 2050 Strategy calls for increasing opportunities for all Pacific peoples

¹ Pacific Islands Forum Special Leaders Retreat Decisions, 3 February 2021. [2021-Special-Leaders-Retreat-
Decisions.pdf \(forumsec.org\)](#)

² World Health Organization 2021; Jansen, 2019.

³ World Health Organization, 2021

including women and girls to engage in economic activity including in the management of their resources and further development of MSMEs, including in cultural industries and professional sport, which are vital for improving and expanding the well-being opportunities for Pacific people, including women and girls.

WEE, climate change and DRR, and ocean resources

8. The economic consequences of climate change in the Pacific disproportionately impact women and other marginalised groups, including youth, people with disabilities, and people who are already economically disadvantaged.⁴ These include resource depletion, rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and natural disasters. Women and girls often have livelihoods that heavily depend on natural resources, including marine and ocean resources, and have limited access to the resources needed to cope with disaster events, including information, rights, education, employment opportunities, economic assets, and healthcare including sexual and reproductive health services. Gendered barriers to participating in the paid workforce make it more difficult for women to diversify their livelihoods in response to natural disasters and climate change, contributing to gender inequity in climate resilience.⁵

9. Despite being on the frontlines during natural disasters and disaster response, women are often not included in the relevant decision-making spaces. Women are leaders in their own families and communities, and their input is essential to ensure that disaster response is gender-responsive, appropriate, relevant, and fit for purpose.

Rebuilding post-COVID-19

Strengthening the focus on the informal sector

10. The informal sector in the region, where more women engage than men⁶, has been crucial in terms of providing an alternative livelihood to people who suffered job losses and reduced hours in the wake of COVID-19. This sector also maintained food security to a great extent during lockdowns and restricted movement within countries.

11. Gender norms have limited their capacity to engage in economic activities as well as putting women at higher risk of contracting the virus, sadly reversing progress on women's rights and gender equality. Girls in the Pacific have also taken on increased domestic caring duties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting their participation in school, and therefore their future employment prospects.⁷

12. Women who work in the informal sector and run informal businesses are unlikely to have insurance, pension schemes, or other forms of protection, instead relying on family support or savings.

⁴ United Nations in the Pacific, 2017; United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2020

⁵ United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2020

⁶ Asian Development Bank, 2018; Asian Development Bank, 2018

⁷ Pacific Women Shaping Pacific. 2021. Thematic Brief: Gender and COVID-19 in the Pacific: Gendered impacts and recommendations for response. https://pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ThematicBrief_COVID19gender_Pacific_March2021.pdf

They are also less likely to benefit from the legal and regulatory frameworks of formal employment,⁸ which can provide benefits, social protections, and workers' representation, leaving them more vulnerable to the negative impacts of frequent natural disasters, climate change, and crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ COVID-19 has shown us the opportunities that are available within the informal sector as an alternative form of employment, but it is critical that those employed within this sector are supported.

13. Efforts such as *Markets for Change* provide ongoing support to women in the informal sector through the creation of safe and secure markets for market vendors and small business owners who would otherwise operate in unsafe conditions. Women are supported to develop financial literacy skills as well as enhance leadership capabilities, recognising that empowering women economically also builds their confidence and capacity to lead their own communities and other formal structures such as market vendor associations and municipal associations. These actions further align with the 2050 Strategy to address gender inequalities through inclusion and equity.

Gender inclusive approaches in the formal sector

14. Legislative and policy protections for women in the workforce are uneven across the region and are far from comprehensive. Limited provisions for paid maternity and paternity leave and childcare discriminate against female workers, particularly those with low incomes.¹⁰ Within the paid workforce, women are likely to have lower-paid jobs and earn less than men.¹¹ This is driven by a combination of discriminatory gender norms and 'unconscious bias.' Women in the formal workforce continue to face barriers including sexual harassment in the workplace. Several countries do not explicitly ban sexual harassment in formal employment legislation, with the exception of Cook Islands, Fiji, Tokelau, and Tonga.¹²

15. The Regional Public Financial Management (PFM) Symposium and the Regional Debt Conference, convened in early 2022, highlighted the need for Members to look at more inclusive and innovative fiscal approaches, highlighting opportunities to integrate gender equality and social inclusion into national PFM systems, national regulations, and through gender responsive budgeting actions, supporting the development of the Blue Pacific Economic Strategy.

WEE and women's leadership in the private sector

16. Global indicators measuring private sector enabling environments often do not provide a comprehensive review of gender inclusivity and are often limited in their coverage of Pacific nations and do not account for the informal sector. Work has commenced in the region to develop a framework with national-level indicators to assess gender inclusivity within the private sector

⁸ UN Women, 2015

⁹ COVID-19 Gender Response Working Group, 2020

¹⁰ International Labour Organization, 2021; Asian Development Bank, 2018c, Appendix 8

¹¹ Boccuzzi, 2021; Pacific Community, 2021; Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 2018

¹² Id, Appendix 8; Government of Tonga, 2020; International Labour Organization, 2021. Some countries have protections against sexual harassment (e.g., Solomon Islands) and sex discrimination (e.g., the Federated States of Micronesia) that only extend to public sector and civil service employees, and not the rest of the workforce. Samoa's Labour and Employment Relations Act includes protections against harassment under its section on abuse and misconduct.

enabling environment in the Pacific. The framework will consolidate data against the indicators and develop recommendations to strengthen the gender inclusivity of the enabling environment and will be piloted in 1-2 countries before being rolled out.¹³

17. A recent study suggests that the business community in the Pacific offers greater opportunities for women to take on leadership roles than in the political sphere, and that businesses can, and have, made rapid progress in promoting women's leadership.¹⁴ Organisations that have shown progress in increasing the representation of women have done so with strategic intent in the form of policy, resources, and strong support from high-level leadership.

18. Pacific Women Lead has strongly supported WEE initiatives in the region since the inception of its predecessor, Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (PWSPD). In the pipeline is a granting mechanism that will be coordinated through Pacific Women Lead to support regional gender equality priorities, including a focus on women's economic empowerment.

Update on PLGED revitalisation and Triennial implementation plan

PLGED revitalisation process

19. A review of the PLGED was undertaken in 2021 by independent consultants, informed by consultations with Forum Members, CROP, civil society, academia, and the private sector. The report was comprehensive and highlighted pertinent issues regarding coordination and collaboration efforts to address gender inequalities within the Blue Pacific Continent.

20. The review was the first step in the revitalisation process. The next phase, currently underway, will involve extensive and inclusive consultations supported by the PLGED Technical Reference Group - Pacific gender and social development experts from Member governments, civil society, and CROP. The TRG provided oversight and guidance throughout the review process and will continue to support the revitalisation of the Declaration including the consultations and drafting process.

Triennial outcomes implementation update

21. The 14th Triennial Conference focused on three priority areas, one of which was women's economic empowerment. SPC is currently working with its Members and stakeholders and with consideration of the revitalisation of the PLGED to develop an Implementation Plan to ensure a clear work program that gives effect to actions arising from the 14th Triennial Outcomes Document and to inform resourcing requirements; monitoring of the implementation will be a focus of the Triennial convenings, including through the annual PIFWLM.

C. Next Steps

22. The PLGED revitalisation process is expected to occur over the remainder of 2022 and first quarter of 2023. It will build on the consultations for the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent and other CROP-led regional gender consultations, taking into account current and in-the-pipeline

¹³ ADB's Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative

¹⁴ PSDI, 2021. [Leadership Matters: Benchmarking Women's Business Leadership in the Pacific](#)

frameworks, including alignment with the Triennial Outcomes Implementation Plan. The final draft of the revitalised Declaration will be presented to the next PIF Women Leaders Meeting prior to final endorsement by PIF Leaders.

23. It is important for Pacific countries to action commitments and recommendations on gender equality at national, regional, and international levels, including:¹⁵

- commit to working together to realise the vision the 2050 Strategy with a strong focus on strengthening gender equality and social inclusion to support women and girls, in all their diversity,
- strengthen efforts to engage women, young people, and persons with disabilities in policy dialogues and actions, allowing for the intergenerational exchange of skills and knowledge,
- develop policies that protect informal workers and design better social protection systems that are sustainable and reach the most vulnerable, including the elderly, women, youth, and persons with disabilities,
- address investment gaps to support early phase start-ups and smaller social enterprises, and support women with disabilities to set up small businesses,
- create enabling environments within their own national systems to support gender-responsive policies and programs, addressing international commitments and those under the PLGED and Pacific Platform for Action.

Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
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¹⁵ These include the recommendations specified in the PIFWLM Outcomes, Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) Agreed Conclusions, 2020 Biennial Pacific Sustainable Development Report, the SEIA Report, and the outcomes of 14th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women, and 7th Ministers for Women Meeting