



FORUM ECONOMIC MINISTERS MEETING

1 – 2 August 2024

INFORMATION PAPER 8 : ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

**Purpose and Recommendations**

**Purpose**

This paper provides an update on actions to progress Women’s Economic Empowerment as one of the focus areas under the Revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED).

**Summary**

- The ability of women to contribute to a nation’s development is key to economic prosperity. Although women make up around half the population of Pacific Island countries, they remain under-represented in the formal workforce.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not the case for the informal economy, where the majority of micro and small businesses are women owned.
- Economically empowering women contributes to development in multiple ways including improving the wellbeing of children and communities. Pacific women typically spend their income on improving the well-being of their families and communities with expenditure patterns focussed on children’s education and the nutritional and healthcare needs of their family reflecting women’s critical roles as primary caregivers and contributors to household economies. Supporting families and catering for small expenses is also the primary reason why most women start businesses.

**A. Overview/Summary**

While there has been commendable progress in various aspects of women's economic empowerment in the Pacific, ongoing efforts are needed to address persistent barriers and ensure sustainable and inclusive economic development. Continued focus on education, policy reforms, financial inclusion, and social change will be essential in building on the achievements to date and fully realizing the potential of women in the Pacific economies. Supporting women entrepreneurs to sustain and grow business operations is key to unlocking women’s true potential and ensuring women are economically empowered.

2. The Implementation Plan for the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent (2050IP), the [revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration \(PLGED\)](#)<sup>2</sup>, and the [Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women’s Human Rights 2018-2030 \(PPA\)](#)<sup>3</sup> clearly identify women’s economic empowerment as having the potential to contribute to the prosperity of the Blue Pacific Continent. The proposed Pacific Roadmap for Economic Development (PRED) and the forthcoming Pacific Regional Private Sector Strategy are important mechanisms for transformative change.

<sup>1</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2018. Women and Business in the Pacific.

<sup>2</sup> <https://forumsec.org/publications/revitalised-pacific-leaders-gender-equality-declaration>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.spc.int/sites/default/files/wordpresscontent/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PPA-2018-Part-I-EN2.pdf>

## B. Discussion

2. It is widely accepted that women represent an untapped potential for economic growth, being able to contribute to national development as entrepreneurs, employees, and consumers.<sup>4</sup> Traction to empower women economically is not going to occur either automatically or quickly in Pacific Island countries. It requires a collaborative effort from governments, development agencies, civil society organisations, and the private sector. It also requires an enabling environment that considers the experiences of women and girls.

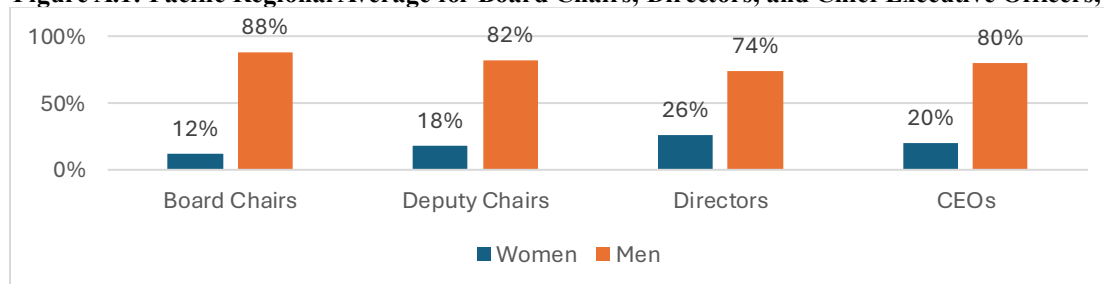
### *Women's employment – making work matter*

3. Across the region, the public sector is the largest employer of women. The advantages of regular income, leave provisions, pension entitlements, ongoing training opportunities, and security in the formal sector are attractive to many women.<sup>5</sup> While most women occupy lower-level positions in the public sector, in some countries, a growing number of women hold mid to senior level public service positions.

4. *Leadership Matters: Benchmarking Women's Business Leadership in the Pacific 2024* edition, to be launched in July 2024, expands upon the baseline established in the original 2021 report to track advancements in women's positions as board directors, board chairs, and chief executive officers (CEOs) in the Pacific. The study collected data from 397 organizations across 14 countries and includes insights from survey responses from 285 Pacific women leaders, and 54 key informant interviews with business leaders (men and women).<sup>6</sup>

5. For the second time, Pacific regional averages for women's representation in business leadership surpassed global averages, where women hold 23% of board director positions and only 6% of CEO roles. Although progress varies by country and sector, the regional trajectory is positive. Women's representation in board director and CEO roles has shown a promising increase, with the proportion of women directors rising from 21% in 2021 to 26% in 2024 and the proportion of women CEOs rising from 13% to 20% during the same period.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure A.1: Pacific Regional Average for Board Chairs, Directors, and Chief Executive Officers, 2024 (%)**



Source: Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative, Leadership Matters 2024 dataset.

6. Despite these gains, disparities persist in the Pacific. Almost one quarter (24%) of all boards still have no women directors, and a further 32% have fewer than 30% women directors. Women's attainment of CEO positions remains deeply inequitable across the Pacific, with men holding 80% of these roles, leaving women with only a 20% representation. Similarly, the

<sup>4</sup> M. Leach, L. Mehta, and P. Prabhakaran. 2016. Gender Equality and Sustainable Development: A Pathways Approach. In *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014: Gender and Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

<sup>5</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2018. *Women and Business in the Pacific*.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pacificpsdi.org/assets/Uploads/PSDI-LeadershipMatters-Web3.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Update by Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative

stagnation in the low number of women serving as board chairs at just 12% and deputy chairs at 18% highlights persistent obstacles to women reaching the highest levels of leadership.<sup>8</sup>

7. Pacific women play a crucial role in the informal sector, which is a significant part of the economies in Pacific Island countries. They are predominantly engaged in activities such as small-scale farming, market vending, handicrafts, and small trade enterprises. Despite their contributions, women in the informal sector often face challenges including limited access to credit, lack of social protection, and insufficient legal recognition and support. Their work is typically undervalued, and they encounter barriers to scaling their businesses due to limited resources and opportunities for skills development.

#### *From economic participation to empowerment*

8. Addressing these issues through targeted policies and support programs is essential to enhance the economic empowerment and social well-being of Pacific women in the informal sector. The Resource and Economic Development thematic area under the [2050 Strategy Implementation Plan](#)<sup>9</sup> and the revitalised PLGED both focus on creating a conducive environment for women and girls' economic empowerment inclusive of those working in the informal and unpaid care economy, women and girls with disabilities, and women and girls in rural, remote, and maritime areas.

9. Women in businesses not only create jobs but also foster innovation and economic diversification. Despite facing barriers such as limited access to finance, education, and training, Pacific women entrepreneurs have shown remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. Their participation in the private sector is crucial for promoting inclusive economic development, as they often invest in their communities and drive social change. Efforts to support women's entrepreneurship through microfinance, capacity-building programs, and policy reforms are essential to unlocking their full potential and ensuring sustainable economic growth in the Pacific region.

10. Members may consider introducing or strengthening the following options:

- a. *Access to credit and financial services*: develop microfinance institutions that provide small loans and financial services tailored to the needs of women in the informal sector. Encourage the formation of cooperatives that enable women to save and access credit collectively. Across the region, some Pacific countries have specific financial services tailored for women but can be difficult and cumbersome to access. In most cases, business proposals are considered unviable, and credit is not granted. To address this, it is essential to offer training programs for women to help them develop strong business proposals and effective loan applications.
- b. *Legal recognition and protection*: implement policies that make it easier for women to register their businesses, providing them with legal recognition and access to support services. Strengthening labour laws can ensure that informal sector workers have access to social protection, safe working conditions, and fair wages. For example, the *Pacific Tripartite High Level Dialogue* held at the PIF Secretariat in January 2024 brought together labour ministers, union representatives and employer representatives from the region to discuss

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<sup>8</sup> Update by Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative

<sup>9</sup> <https://forumsec.org/2050>

opportunities and collective actions that can enhance job-rich growth that is inclusive and transformative, strengthen capacity to promote and ensure the realization of fundamental principles and rights at work and bolster regional cooperation and multilateralism on world of work issues.

- c. *Digital inclusion*: offer training in digital literacy to help women use technology for business development and market access and develop and promote e-commerce platforms that allow women to sell their products online.
- d. *Health and Social Services*: improving women's access to healthcare services, including reproductive health, for women in the informal sector and providing affordable childcare facilities to enable women to participate more fully in economic activities.

### *Using the right tools*

11. There are currently tools available that Member governments can utilise in their own national systems to mainstream gender equality and to strengthen gender inclusion and responsiveness. These include:

- a. *Gender Inclusive Private Sector Framework*: Leadership Matters 2024 found that the Pacific region shows considerable variation in the legislative and policy environment supporting women's leadership, such as legal protection against gender-based discrimination and harassment in employment, equal pay and dismissal due to pregnancy. The [Gender Inclusive Private Sector \(GIPS\) Framework](#)<sup>10</sup> launched in March 2024, measures the extent to which the legal, regulatory and policy environment is inclusive for women as consumers, employees, entrepreneurs and leaders across 7 domains. Country assessments have been conducted for Fiji, Solomon Islands and Tonga with assessments for Kiribati, Nauru, PNG, Tuvalu and Vanuatu to be completed by the end of 2024.
- b. *Supplementary Framework for Assessing Gender Responsive Public Financial Management (GRPFM Framework)*: The Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) supplementary framework for assessing gender responsive public financial management (GRPFM) is a set of nine indicators that measure the degree to which a country's PFM systems address the government's goals with regard to acknowledging different needs of men and women, and different subgroups of these categories, and promoting gender equality. The framework can be applied at both national and subnational levels. Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and Tonga have carried out PEFA GRPFM reviews. These countries have made efforts to incorporate gender considerations into their public financial management systems, reflecting a commitment to promoting gender equality through their budgeting and financial policies. The PEFA GRPFM assessments provide valuable insights into the progress made and the areas needing improvement to ensure that public financial management systems support gender equality objectives effectively. Fiji has gone even further to institute gender analysis as part of the national budget submission process and capacity building within government ministries and departments.

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<sup>10</sup> Found online at <https://gips.pacificpsdi.org/>

### **C. Next Steps**

12. The Secretariat will continue to collaborate with CROP and development partners to strengthen GESI mainstreaming across regional actions under the 2050IP and regional strategies and frameworks. Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) will be covered under the monitoring of the revitalised PLGED.

Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat  
25 July 2024