UN WOMEN FIJI MULTI-COUNTRY OFFICE

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ABOUT US

The UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office (MCO) collaborates with governments, civil society organisations (CSOs), the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific (CROP) agencies, development partners, faith-based groups, traditional institutions, the private sector and United Nations (UN) entities[1] across the Pacific to tackle gender inequalities, empower women in all their diversity and foster more inclusive societies. Over the past decade, Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) have made notable progress in committing to the protection and advancement of women's human rights. However, gender discrimination and inequalities still remain widespread in the Pacific. Much work remains to be done.

Although women are increasingly involved in the economy, they are still disproportionately represented in the informal sector, often engaged in low-wage or unpaid work in the family. They are also disproportionately affected by economic crises, as well as climate and health emergencies. The Pacific region also continues to have low rates of female representation in leadership spaces and has among the lowest rates of women in parliaments in the world. While Family Protection and Domestic Violence Laws have been enacted to protect women and girls, the Pacific region has some of the highest rates of violence against women recorded in the world – twice the global average, with an estimated two in every three Pacific women impacted by gender-based violence. During severe natural disasters, women face heightened risks of violence, along with reduced access to critical services, such as sexual and reproductive health services. The challenges confronting women in the Pacific are complex and often intertwined, prompting UN Women to address these interconnected issues through four key programme areas:

- **Governance and Participation in Public Life**
- **Women's Economic Empowerment**
- **Ending Violence against Women and Girls**
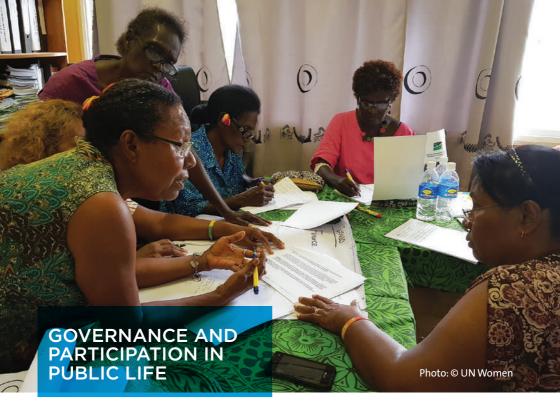- **Humanitarian Response and Resilience to Disasters**

These four program areas are underpinned by UN Women's normative and UN Coordination efforts to strengthen accountability on normative commitments, better leverage UN system-wide strategies and actions and support gender equality and the empowerment of women in all their diversity.

The UN Women Fiji MCO covers the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), Nauru, Niue, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The regional hub is located in Fiji, with presence in Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu.

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1.   Listed in alphabetical order

UN WOMEN FIJI'S COVERAGE

Palau

Federated States
of Micronesia

Marshall Islands

Nauru

Solomon Islands

Kiribati

Tuvalu

Tokelau

Vanuatu

Samoa

Fiji

Niue

Cook Islands

Tonga

KEY: UN Women Country Offices

GOVERNANCE AND PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

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What's the issue?

Women and girls represent almost 50 per cent of the world's population, yet they are often excluded from the political arena and shut out of decision-making spaces that directly affect their lives. They are also unable to access institutions and the systems that would enable them to benefit from opportunities and access assistance. Increasing women's political participation, leadership, and access to justice are vital to supporting women in realising their human rights.

The Pacific has the lowest level of women's political participation in the world.[2] While levels of participation vary throughout the region, the issues Pacific women face are often similar. Discriminatory attitudes and practices, intolerance, adherence to traditional social gender norms, caregiving responsibilities, financial constraints, and lack of access to relevant support, knowledge and training often stand in the way of what women need to become effective leaders. The continued absence of women in decision-making and leadership roles in the Pacific reinforces stereotypes among potential candidates and the public, undermining efforts to build the skills, networks and confidence women need to change the game.

Despite the many challenges they face, women and girls in the Pacific continue to forge forward as champions for their rights, equality, peace and security. Many women in the Pacific are actively working to promote peace and conflict prevention, often at great risk to their personal security. Significant progress in ensuring peace and security would benefit both Pacific Island nations and the women and girls who live there.

2.   Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2024 *Regional groupings | Parline: The IPU's open data platform*

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Our solutions

While Pacific women are significantly involved in supporting their communities, the roles they play and the high educational attainment rates among girls have yet to translate into increased political participation. UN Women's approach is multifaceted, offering support to women seeking leadership positions by supporting the sharing of information, global good practices and by providing the technical skills needed to support these efforts. Recognising the Pacific perception of leadership as community service, UN Women facilitates engagement between women leaders and their communities, promotes active citizenship and works with civil society to enhance positive perceptions of women as leaders.

Ensuring Governments meet their CEDAW commitments

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) reporting process serves as a tool to monitor the progress and status of women's human rights by State Parties. This evidence-based, regular reporting system encourages countries to advance women's human rights systematically, both in law and in practice.

UN Women supports countries meeting their CEDAW reporting requirements in collaboration with CROP agencies and UN partners across the Pacific. In July 2022, through a regional learning exchange, UN Women, in partnership with the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) and the Pacific Community (SPC), supported a group of Pacific Island State Parties (Cook Islands, FSM, Fiji, Kiribati, RMI, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) to strengthen their capacities for CEDAW reporting. In addition, UN Women is assisting the national gender machineries in Samoa and the Solomon Islands in reviewing their national legislation to enable them to identify gaps in women's human rights protection. These legislative reviews will enable CEDAW State Parties to advocate for and actively amend policies and laws that discriminate against women.

Photo: © UN Women

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

What's the Issue?

Historically, traditional gender norms, behaviours and social structures have significantly disadvantaged women economically. Institutional barriers and gender roles often limit women's economic capabilities and their voice and agency in household and community decisions. Economic participation empowers women to drive positive change in their lives and communities, benefiting entire countries. In the Pacific, where there are high levels of informality and subsistence level activities are also prevalent, women are heavily engaged in both. Although the informal economy's significance is often underestimated, it contributes up to 50 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in some Pacific countries, providing livelihoods for over half the working population.[3] Among small-scale market operators, women comprise an estimated 85 percent of Pacific vendors.[4] Despite this, women are often excluded from market governance in the past. In Pacific Island Countries and Territories, women are also underrepresented in the formal workforce, though their representation in business leadership in the Pacific compares favourably with global averages.[5]

The region's vulnerability to extreme weather events and other natural disasters, however, poses a danger to women's informal and subsistence activities. Enhancing women's economic empowerment (WEE) is crucial for achieving gender equality and sustainable development in the Pacific region.

Our solutions

UN Women recognises that our work must address the intersections between women's economic empowerment, protection, non-discrimination, leadership and meaningful participation in decision-making, and resilience to disasters. Marketplaces are critical spaces where these interrelated factors intersect. UN Women is actively improving working conditions for women market vendors in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands

and Vanuatu through the Markets for Change (M4C) Project, which is in the second phase of implementation (2022–2026), following the conclusion of the first phase (2014–2021).

M4C ensures that marketplaces in the rural and urban areas of these four Pacific Island countries are safe, inclusive and non-discriminatory and supportive of women engaged in small-scale businesses within these market spaces. The project supports the creation and strengthening of representative marketplace groups, which enhance the roles and influence of women market vendors. The project also focuses on boosting the financial literacy of vendors and market vendor associations and supports greater access to financial services, improved agricultural skills, and, in some cases, climate-smart agricultural production.

M4C also works to strengthen the accountability and capacity of market management and municipal and provincial governments through the provision of training and technical support. This lays the groundwork for local governments to employ gender-responsive policies, procedures and decision-making processes that are receptive to the needs of market vendors, especially women. The project also has an infrastructure component, which focuses on improving onsite services at the design and construction phases to ensure that marketplaces are safe and more resilient to environmental shocks, such as extreme weather events.

Despite their importance to national economies, for employment, food access and security and their central role in the lives of many marginalised women and families, marketplaces do not receive sufficient attention from planners, local authorities, other government agencies, and development partners. Marketplaces are often not considered in urban planning, and when they are, the voices of the vendors themselves are not well considered. The result is an urban planning process that fails to take advantage of the considerable economic, livelihood, social and cultural opportunities presented by improving these marketplaces.

M4C is changing this dynamic by strengthening collective action among vendors themselves, directly engaging market management and local authorities, and providing a range of forums where these authorities, other government agencies, development partners, and civil society are actively engaged in planning, problem-solving, and, more broadly, strategy and policy making. The M4C Phase I was supported by the Governments of Australia (AUD $21,365,733), Canada (CAD $ 3,850,000) and New Zealand (NZD$ 1,613,185.45).

M4C Phase II receives primary support from the Government of Australia (AUD$12,873,179.19). Additional support is provided by the Joint Programme on Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (USD $524,600.00), implemented by FAO, IFAD, UN Women, and WFP, with funding from Norway, Sweden, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

3. Australian Aid. 2016. Pacific Regional Youth Employment Scan; Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2016. Unlocking the Economic Potential of Women in the Pacific. Manila: ADB; ADB. 2014. "The Pacific's Employment Challenges." Pacific Economic Monitor: July 2014.
4. ADB and The Pacific Community. 2016. Gender Statistics: The Pacific and Timor-Leste.
5. How the Pacific Business Community is accelerating women's leadership (2021) Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative. Available at: https://www.pacificpsdi.org/news-and-insights/op-eds/read/how-the-pacific-business-community-is-accelerating-womens-leadership#:~:text=In%20the%20Pacific%2C%20women%20hold,and%2For%20chief%20operating%20officers
6. The document 'Do No Harm' analyses poorer households in Solomon Islands and provides excellent insights into the nature of marginalization and the role of marketplaces in meeting livelihood needs. See http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2018-03/do_no_harm_solomon_islands_low_res.pdf

Photo: © UN Women

ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

What's the Issue?

In the Pacific region, rates of violence against women and girls are among the highest in the world, particularly Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). Up to 68 percent of women in some countries reported having experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime from an intimate partner (relative to the global average of 30 percent). These rates were reported to be even higher for women with disabilities and persons of diverse gender identities in countries in which data is available, e.g. Fiji.[7] Despite the severity and extent of violence, services for survivors are limited and virtually non-existent in remote areas. This issue is particularly critical in the Pacific context, where over 60 percent of Pacific Islanders live in rural areas or on outer islands.[8] Even when services are available,

Pacific women may face other barriers, such as social norms that place the blame on survivors, creating stigma and fostering a culture of silence around the issue. These social and cultural factors make it difficult for women to talk about their experiences, let alone report them and seek help. In addition to the devastating human cost of violence against women and girls, the economic costs are also high, with increased burdens on health care, social services and policing.

Decades of activism and mobilisation by women's movements have placed ending violence against women and girls high on national, regional and international agendas. Pacific governments are exercising their political will to end violence against women as they work towards advancing

7. DIVA for Equality. (2018). Unjust, Unequal, Unstoppable: Fiji Lesbians, Bisexual women, Transmen and Gender Non-Conforming People tipping the scales toward justice.
8. Rural population (% of total population) – Pacific small states. 2022. Retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=S2

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national legislation, policies and action plans. In 2012, Pacific Islands Forum Leaders signed the Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED), condemning violence and committing to ensuring access to essential services for survivors. After a two-year review process involving extensive consultations with national governments, civil society, and regional and partner organisations to ensure ownership of the next iteration, Pacific leaders endorsed a revitalised PLGED in November 2023. Communities in the Pacific region, including places where we play, pray, learn and engage, are beginning to break the silence, speak out and take action against gender-based violence. Work on violence prevention by national governments and CSOs is also gaining momentum.

Our solutions

In the Pacific, the UN Women Fiji MCO Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) programme takes a holistic approach centred on three key pillars:

- Supporting Pacific governments to adopt and implement laws and policies that address VAWG and overall gender discrimination and inequality.

- Preventing violence by addressing the main drivers of VAWG by transforming social norms, practices and behaviours that tolerate and condone violence against women and girls.

- Enhancing access to quality, coordinated and survivor-centred essential services – social services, health, police and justice – to address immediate needs and prevent violence from reoccurring.

Central to the programme is the Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and Girls (Pacific Partnership) programme, which, in its first phase of programming, brought together governments, CROP agencies, CSOs, communities and other partners to promote gender equality, prevent violence against women and girls, and increase access to quality response services for survivors. The partnership was funded primarily by the European Union (EUR 12.7 million), the Governments of Australia (EUR 11.1 million) and New Zealand (EUR 3.2 million) and UN Women (EUR 0.6 million), and led by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Pacific Community (SPC) and UN Women Fiji MCO, which also implemented the largest of the programme's three outcome areas.

Through the Pacific Partnership, UN Women has supported the strengthening of comprehensive multi-sector coordination in responding to cases of gender-based violence through the development and launch of three national Service-Delivery Protocols (SPDs) and the deepening of two SDPs in five countries, along with two national counselling registries and three Pacific-adapted gender-based violence administrative data systems. On the prevention front, among other key work, UN Women has also strengthened relationships with faith leaders and sports actors, including by co-creating a globally recognised social norms change sports programme and brokering a regional impact network on sport and gender equality. Work is also underway on the inception of the second phase of this programme from 2024 onwards..

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND RESILIENCE TO DISASTERS

What's the Issue?

The Pacific region is among the most vulnerable in the world to extreme weather events and other natural disasters. Cyclones, floods and droughts are becoming increasingly frequent and intense in nature, with devastating effects for the countries and territories that are impacted. In 2021, it was reported that changes in the environment are already and will continue to be the single greatest threat to the security and well-being of Pacific people.[9]

Women tend to be disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis and other natural disasters because many rely on informal and subsistence activities, which means they lack the capacity to respond to and mitigate the impacts of crises. Additionally, in times of crises, women and girls are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation and increased unpaid care and domestic work burdens.

Women have always played an important leadership and stewardship role in natural resource management and conservation efforts as a function of their interaction and reliance on the same. Women are also often the first responders to crises and play a central role in the survival and resilience of families and communities, but are often not actively engaged in shaping the response, or leading recovery and resilience-building efforts.

Too often, their unique knowledge, capabilities and needs are overlooked in national and regional policies on humanitarian and disaster risk reduction, and their rights are left unprotected. While the protection of women and girls in all their diversity is crucial in disaster response and building resilience, their meaningful participation and leadership are also vital to all successful humanitarian and resilience-building actions.

While a number of governments in the Pacific have taken steps to include gender and protection in their responses, much work remains to ensure that those steps create real change for women and girls when disasters strike. Women's unequal access to rights, opportunities, resources and knowledge amplifies their exposure and vulnerability to natural hazards.[10] Crises and disasters also increase women's burden of unpaid care work and create spikes in gender-based violence and exploitation. Meanwhile, women's exclusion from disaster responses and decision-making only serves to underscore and magnify their vulnerability and undermine their resilience.

Our solutions

UN Women is working to scale up protection, livelihoods support, learning, and recovery services for crisis-affected women and girls and provide institutional and programmatic support to women-led and women's rights organizations. UN Women is also supporting the advancement of positive social norms and combating gender stereotypes among humanitarian service providers, community members, and leaders in crisis settings.

UN Women supports the Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) and national protection clusters to make gender and protection a priority in emergency preparedness and response. UN Women also leads the Pacific Humanitarian Protection Cluster (PHPC), which supports protection response in emergencies across the PICTs covered by the PHT. UN Women further supports work on child protection, ending gender-based violence, and psychosocial support during emergencies; it also ensures the inclusivity of marginalised groups and protection responses in other clusters.

On the resilience-building front, despite some progress, there is a significant gap regarding gender, disability, and social inclusion in recovery governance. To close this gap, UN Women Fiji MCO runs a programme focused on women's leadership and meaningful participation in disaster and climate-resilient policies, processes, and systems.

UN Women Fiji MCO provides leadership to the PHPC, working on enhancing regional and national capacity for gender- and protection-sensitive disaster preparedness, response and recovery. It does so by coordinating the humanitarian protection efforts of UN agencies and regional and international organisations through awareness-raising, capacity development and technical guidance and support.

As a member of the PHPC and in partnership with national disaster management offices and women's ministries, UN Women has facilitated training on gender and protection in humanitarian action in several Pacific Island countries, such as Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu, and also works closely with women's ministries to provide technical support as part of the national protection cluster and/or committee in several countries.

Additionally, through the Women's Resilience to Disaster (WRD) programme, institutions and individuals are restructuring their strategies to prioritise gender equality, protection and inclusion. This involves enhancing policies, fostering coordination and collaboration among stakeholders, engaging communities, building capacities, sharing knowledge, using gender data and advocating for change. These efforts enable stakeholders to address the multifaceted challenges of disaster risk reduction and work towards sustainable resilience including in the context of climate change. By empowering women and girls and creating supportive environments through community engagement, these initiatives target the specific vulnerabilities experienced by women and girls during crises.

This marks a major shift towards gender equality and social inclusion aimed at improving disaster management practices and fostering long-term sustainability in the Pacific region.[11] The programme, which runs in four countries, has established partnerships with national governments, CSOs and other relevant UN agencies to deliver results at various levels. The WRD programme is funded by the Australian Government (AUD$ 13,500,000.)

9. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/factsheets/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Regional_Fact_Sheet_Small_Islands.pdf.
10. UN Women. Undated. Women Resilience to Disaster programme. https://wrd.unwomen.org/
11. Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Island and Vanuatu.

NORMATIVE AND COORDINATION WORK

Photo: © UN Women

The UN Women Fiji MCO actively supports governments in operationalising their normative commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment. Leveraging our UN Coordination mandate, we work together with CROP agencies and other UN partners to provide support to governments, CSOs and other stakeholders to achieve this goal. This includes supporting the engagement of governments, CSOs and other stakeholders on the work of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and Human Rights Treaty bodies i.e. the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Universal Periodic Reviews. In collaboration with our partners, UN Women also advocates for and supports governments and other stakeholders in the systematic integration of the human rights principles and standards reflected in key gender equality and women's empowerment normative frameworks in regional, national and sectoral plans, policy frameworks, laws and strategies.

In the Pacific region, the UN Women Fiji MCO promotes coordination and collective action through two main groups: the UN Pacific Gender Theme Group (GTG) and the Pacific Gender Coordination Group. The Gender Theme Group, co-chaired by UN Women and UNFPA, serves as the primary coordination mechanism within the UN for gender mainstreaming, providing executive secretariat support. The Pacific Gender Coordination Group has played a pivotal role in enhancing coordination between the UN and CROP agencies, civil society and other partners working on gender issues across the Pacific. Co-chaired by UN Women, the Pacific Community (SPC), and CSOs (on a rotating basis), it provides a platform for sharing, dialogue and strategising.

Through the Pacific Gender Coordination Group and its associated Gender Technical Working Group (GTWG), there is improved coordination and strategic engagement with women-led and feminist CSOs in the Pacific and intergovernmental organisations. The GTWG, comprising representatives from UN Women, UNFPA, civil society, SPC, and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) coordinates technical and financial support for Pacific delegations participating in regional and global intergovernmental processes such as the Triennial Conference for Pacific Women, Beijing reporting and CSW. It ensures continuity of outcomes and negotiated language across various gender-related meetings and sectors. The discussions and outcomes from these groups often feed into higher-level platforms such as the Pacific Islands Forum Women Leaders Meeting.

ACKNOWLEDGING PARTNERSHIPS

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