

Status of Gender Equality in the Pacific

Review of progress in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action in the Pacific Islands countries and territories

Executive summary

The past 20 years have seen significant progress in gender equality being recognised as being an integral part of the economic, political, cultural and social development of Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). This progress is reflected in an important body of reforms and innovative policies. Since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, the overwhelming majority of PICTs have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and have engaged in the regular reporting of their progress towards full compliance. Across the Pacific region, initiatives have been carried out to build the capacity of public institutions and civil society in the various aspects of gender mainstreaming.

Consequently, most PICTs have adopted specific national gender equality policies, and have established national women's machineries, while six of them currently apply affirmative action measures to foster women's political participation.

Eleven countries have conducted national prevalence studies on domestic violence, which have informed the design and adoption of specific legislation to protect women from violence.

The effects of those reforms on the advancement of Pacific women are being seen in a great variety of contexts, and manifest in many ways, including women's education levels, their leadership in communities and civil society organisations, and their entrepreneurship and economic dynamism. However, recurrent manifestations of gender inequality remain in all sectors of the Pacific community, such as in high rates of gender-based violence, low proportions of women represented at all levels of decision-making, significant under-representation of women in the formal economy, inequitable access of women to health and social services, and in women rarely having their concerns reflected in strategies related to climate change, natural disasters, food security and renewable energy. In some PICTs, significant progress has been achieved in reducing rates of teenage pregnancy and maternal mortality. However, in others, women's and adolescents' limited access to contraception and to sexual and reproductive health services and information continue to hinder progress.

Expressed political will is too rarely translated into action to ensure that women are able to fully participate in decision-making – from the community to the national level – while cross-cutting work to address gender equality in policies and programmes remains generally inadequate across the region. The Pacific Forum Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration in 2012 reiterated the commitment of Pacific governments to gender equality, recommending renewed national action towards gender-responsive government programmes and policies. However, in most PICTs, attention, resources and capacity committed to gender equality have been insufficient to achieve substantive gains.

Key findings:

- Women are highly vulnerable to hardship and poverty, especially in the context of rising food and fuel prices and reduced remittances sent by family members. Low levels of formal social protection and eroding traditional systems of solidarity aggravate women's exposure to poverty. There are concerns over the slow pace of progress in women's labour participation, access to employment and decent work, while women continue to be over-represented in informal and subsistence sectors.
- Gender parity in primary education is improving in most PICTs. However, in secondary and tertiary education, issues affecting girls' enrolment and retention rates include early marriage, pregnancy, the risk of harm when travelling to school, insecure toilet facilities at school, the ever-present risk of harassment and sexual assault, and the costs associated with education. Due to gender-segregated labour markets and the weight of traditional gender roles, education gains for women do not always lead to better employment outcomes.
- Substantial efforts have been made to better document violence against women and to increase the comparability of data collected across the region. For example, a number of recent studies investigating incidence rates for sexual and physical violence in the Pacific region followed the World Health Organization (WHO) methodology on researching violence against women.¹ Revealed prevalence rates ranged from 32 per cent in the Cook Islands to 68 per cent in Kiribati.² However, access to justice for survivors of violence remains inadequate, and little data is available on the prosecution rates for perpetrators.
- Access to social services for survivors of violence remains grossly insufficient. Better planning and financing is needed to prevent gender-based violence and to mitigate its impact on women and girls.
- Overall, some progress in the area of maternal health has been made across some PICTs. Access to reproductive health services remains difficult for some women, due to age, geography, cultural barriers, disability, and women's lack of empowerment in decision-making over their own bodies. Many women have

¹ WHO and Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) 2005.

² Prevalence rates for experienced sexual and/or physical intimate partner violence revealed in four of these studies were: 32 per cent in the Cook Islands, 51 per cent in the Marshall Islands, 64 per cent in Fiji and 68 per cent in Kiribati.

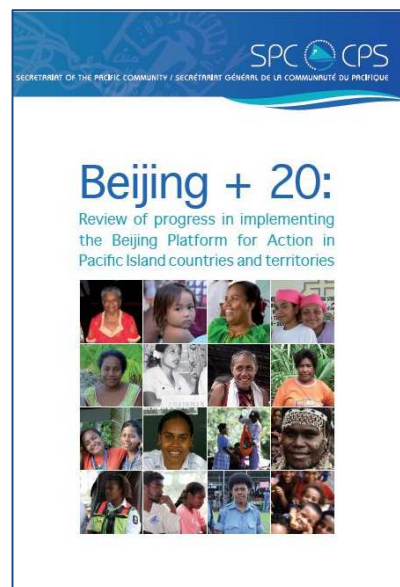
yet to see their sexual and reproductive health rights recognised and respected. Non-communicable diseases are taking an increasing toll on women's health, and these contribute to dramatically increasing their workload due to their role as primary caregivers.

- There has been progress in fostering women's political participation. Six PICTs report that they have introduced reserved seats for women candidates in elected bodies, either at the national or local level.³ Such advances are promising and are likely to have important effects on the uptake of women's concerns. Nevertheless, gender norms and political and socio-economic factors continue to limit women's political representation at all levels. At the time of writing, only 86 parliamentarians in the Pacific region were women. However, the Pacific French territories stand out as leaders in terms of women's political participation: Women now comprise 56 per cent of French Polynesia's parliament, 42 per cent of New Caledonia's parliament, and 20 per cent of Wallis and Futuna's parliament.
- Most PICTs have specific, overarching national gender policies, but the human and financial resources dedicated to their implementation are usually insufficient. There is a need to translate commitments made through gender policies into national development and sectoral strategies, where gender issues are usually either not mentioned, or are featured in a separate section rather than mainstreamed throughout all development goals and strategies. The few examples of gender being at least partly mainstreamed in the sectoral work of government tend to be in the areas of health and education.
- National women's machineries⁴ are well established across the region and are proving critical in promoting gender-responsive public policies. However, they remain highly marginalised within government; they are typically insufficiently funded and short-staffed, which limits their capacity to influence national and sectoral policies, and their coordination and monitoring mandates are not always clear.
- The availability of sex-disaggregated data and statistics is increasing in the region. The capacity to use this information to inform policies across government needs to be strengthened. There is also a need to expand the scope of data generated to increase the level of understanding of issues such as pay disparity, gender roles in food security and in the information economics sector, the value of unpaid care support, and the cost of domestic violence.
- There is more awareness about the role of women in natural resources management and climate change adaptation. However, some traditional practices continue to limit women's participation in land use management, and it is still rare that their concerns are reflected in environmental and climate change strategies.

³ Samoa, Papua New Guinea's province of Bougainville, and Vanuatu.

⁴ The Beijing Platform for Action defines 'National Women's Machinery': 'A national machinery for the advancement of women is the central policy coordinating unit inside the government. Its main task is to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas.' (Paragraph 201).

- Most PICTs now mandate the same legal age of marriage for both men and women. Progress has been made to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy, and efforts are being intensified to address some of the profound effects on girls' educational opportunities and future prospects in all areas of their lives.
- Notwithstanding the progress that has been made in the last 20 years, the Beijing Platform for Action remains a critical instrument and an important reference point for accelerating progress towards achieving gender equality. Commitment to implementing all aspects of the Beijing Platform for Action need to feature highly on the political agendas of PICTs, development partners and civil society. This report endorses calls for gender equality to be reflected in the post-2015 international development framework, both as a standalone, sustainable development goal, and as a cross-cutting, enabling condition for the realisation of all other development goals.



We thank UN Women for their financial support

Available for free on SPC's website <http://www.spc.int/images/publications/en/Corporate/Beijing20.pdf>

For more information, please contact SPC- Gender Unit - Social Development Programme

Brigitte Leduc- Gender Equality Adviser
brigittel@spc.int

Maire Dwyer – Gender Equality Adviser North Pacific
maired@spc.int

Kim Robertson – Gender Statistics Adviser
Kimr@spc.int

Joanne Lee Kunatuba – Gender Equality Officer
joannek@spc.int

Mereoni Tavakaturaga-Robinson
Mereonit@spc.int