

Gender Profile

Cook Islands

Gender Context	3
Gender Issues	3
<i>Participation of women in decision-making and leadership</i>	3
<i>Unequal Access to Productive and Economic Resources</i>	3
<i>Violence against Women</i>	4
<i>Gender in Development</i>	4
Sector Issues	5
<i>Health</i>	5
<i>Education</i>	5
<i>Water and Sanitation</i>	6
Institutional and Legal Framework	6
Actors	6
Recommendations	6

Gender Context

The total population of Cook Islands, as enumerated on 1 December 2011, was 17,794 people consisting of 8,815 men and 8,979 women. Women of the Cook Islands have witnessed many changes in the last decades toward the improvement of their status and rights, greater access to education and employment, and access to high level management positions in Government Institutions. The 2013 Pacific Regional MDG Tracking Report notes that Cook Islands is one of the three countries in the Pacific on track to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. The report notes achievement of gender parity in education with more girls attending secondary school. Women's economic participation is increasing but there are still concerns over pay disparities. Currently, women only hold 4.2% of seats in parliament still reflecting the low representation of women in parliament. Cook Islands in comparison to all the other countries has the highest percentage of women in paid employment in the non-agricultural sector, which is above 50%.¹ However, there are still remaining gender inequalities that require the mobilization of all sectors of the society in order to eliminate those inequalities.

Gender Issues

Participation of women in decision-making and leadership

The Cook Islands Government through the Pacific Plan and various other regional and international commitments has committed to advancing women participation in decision-making processes. Despite the comparatively high level of education and proven capacity to hold senior management level positions, women are still under represented in public offices.

In 2010, there were 10 female candidates that contested in the Cook Islands general election, compared to 60 male candidates. This reflected an increase in women standing for elections from 2006 when only eight candidates contested. Only one female candidate was successful in the 2010 elections compared to 3 female candidates in the 2006 elections.

Research and consultation at the national and regional level has shown that women face a number of challenges when deciding to stand for elections, the lack of time and financial resources for campaigning and weak social capital; in addition to ingrained beliefs that decision making and politics is a domain for men, and they therefore are more competent in national decision making. There are currently no political discussions or commitments towards temporary special measures for reserved seats for women in parliament.²

Unequal Access to Productive and Economic Resources

Although Cook Islands women are now more educated, they benefit from a land succession system where they can claim customary land (in most cases), are able to access credit and feature significantly in paid employment, they do, in fact, still face unequal access to productive and economic resources. The 2006 Census showed that a significant gender difference remained in earnings for paid employment: more women than men were in the

¹ 2013 Pacific Regional MDG Tracking Report page 34 figure 3.

² Cook Islands National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, Strategic Plan of Action (2011 – 2016)

lowest- income bracket (less than NZ\$5,000) and more men than women were in the highest earning groups. It is a fact that men earn more than women, confirming pay disparities, but these disparities are narrowing especially in the outer islands. Employment rights issues remain a growing challenge, with emerging civil cases on sexual harassment and protection from unfair dismissal.

There is an increase in female-headed households which represented 24% of the households in 2001 to 25% (1,073) of the households in 2006 with Rarotonga showing 74% (793) of this type of family arrangement. Most of those who receive social welfare benefits for destitution are single women heads of households with children who suffer elevated risks of having low incomes or being socially isolated.

In the context of low salaries and high cost of imported goods, women continue to engage in subsistence livelihood activities notably in agriculture and fisheries, especially in the Outer Islands. In 2006, this is evident in handicraft making including sewing activities, gardening and fishing activities both in the outer islands and the main island Rarotonga.

The growing number of women in non-agriculture wage is expected to increase consistently. Since the Initial MDG report (2005), the percentage change has improved from 38% in 1991 to 55% in 2007. This is a 44.7% change over the last 16 years, or an average annual improvement rate of 2.8%. These figures confirm that more women are becoming self-employed and create businesses dealing in tourism, retail, arts and other enterprises.³

Violence against Women

A national survey on the prevalence, causes and consequences of violence against women in Cook Islands is yet to be carried out. Findings from a situational analysis report states that domestic and sexual violence is still a very sensitive issue, which few women will speak openly about. The Punanga Tauturu Inc (PTI) is an NGO that is in the forefront of addressing the issue. The Cook Islands Police, supported by development partners, has set up a Domestic Violence Unit in response to the increasing incidence. Also in place is a 'No Drop Policy', where offenders will still be processed through the court system even if the partner wishes to withdraw the charge. The up skilling of the Community Policing Unit to deal with gender based violence supports Cook Islands Police efforts to combat this activity. The Family Bill which is part of the legislative agenda makes provisions to address domestic violence and creates access to protection orders. At present there is no specific domestic violence law and sexual reform is necessary to address the inconsistency in sentencing on sexual offences.

Gender in Development

The gender stocktake of the Government conducted by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) in 2009-2010 reveals that gender issues are rarely discussed as development issues among government agencies and gender equality is not mainstreamed across all sectors. With the exception of the Education and Health sectors, there is little production and use of sex disaggregated data and gender analysis for guiding policy making, programs design and service delivery. There is no accountability system for mainstreaming gender at the institutional and individual levels. The technical capacity to conduct gender analysis and mainstream gender is generally low in all sectors. The coordination of initiatives for addressing women's human rights is weak and collaboration with the national women machinery is very limited. The financial and human resources for mainstreaming gender are largely insufficient. Some legislative gaps to comply with CEDAW's commitments remain

³ ibid

particularly in the area of violence against women, women's employment and economic rights.

Sector Issues

Health

The overall health indicators have improved considerably in the last decades. Health care services are more accessible and the quality of care is better. The country has made great strides in reducing the maternal mortality ratio and the infant mortality rate, and the reproductive health standards are good. According to the 2013 Regional MDG Tracking report, skilled birth attendance is generally high and Cook Islands have the highest contraceptive prevalence rate among the FICs. Teenage pregnancies are declining and comparatively low, with 100 percent antenatal coverage. There is no data on unmet need for family planning.

The SPC Gender Stocktake highlights concerns around the consistent prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among younger men and women, which reaches up to 46 per cent according to a recent study conducted by the Ministry of Health (MOH). Discriminatory practices still exist in the area of sexual and reproductive health with the current policy requiring a husband's authorisation if his wife wants sterilisation. Abortion is still illegal, unless the life of the mother is threatened or if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest.

Other health issues, such as non-communicable diseases (NCDs), are becoming serious issues affecting women's health. The NCD STEPS survey conducted in 2004 reveals that the prevalence of hypertension was 29.5 per cent and diabetes 23.7 per cent; 88.5 per cent of the population is overweight and 61.4 per cent is obese (GCI 2009a). Besides their vulnerability to those diseases and conditions, women are usually the ones providing care for ill family members — this burden is rarely acknowledged.⁴

Education

Education in the Cook Islands continues to be compulsory and free for children from 4 – 16 years of age. Formal education in the Cook Islands starts at 4 years of age and primary from New Entrance for 5 year olds to Year 8 when students are 10 years of age. According to the 2013 Regional MDG Progress Report gender parity in education has been achieved with more girls attending secondary school. In relation to post-school qualifications, the 2006 Census revealed that while a higher proportion of males had trade and business certificate qualifications, 10.9% and 3.8% respectively, there were a higher proportion of females (16%) than males with (12.6%) with a tertiary qualification.⁵

The Government of Cook Islands CEDAW Report, 2006, states that education for women and girls is a high priority for the Government with more work needed to translate educational attainment into career achievement. More work is also needed to ensure that the legislative framework for education policy development is adequate and some proposals for legislative reform of the Education Act are being considered.

⁴SPC Stocktake of the gender mainstreaming capacity of Pacific Island Governments, Cook Islands, 2012

⁵Government of Cook Islands Millennium Development Goals Report, 2009

Water and Sanitation

Challenges in the water sector relate to the geographical dispersion and the consequent high cost of providing services to the islands, and the general shortage of appropriate qualified staff in the sector. The lack of metering of production or consumption of water by users means that consumption is generally proliferate and wasteful; and there is little incentive to conserve water, particularly in Rarotonga. Where water resources are scarcer as in the outer islands, people are more inclined to conserve water. Gender plays an intricate role in the management of water resources and decisions made with regards to water impact men and women differently. For these reasons gender must be taken into account to give a balanced and equitable output.

Institutional and Legal Framework

The Gender and Development Division under the Ministry of Internal Affairs represents the official national women machinery. The Division has a coordination and advisory role, to inform, advise and provide technical assistance to the different levels of Government to address gender inequalities and issues relating to the violation of women's human rights, as well as coordinate Government's efforts for addressing the issues. It also supports the monitoring and reporting process of the progress and gaps at national, regional and international levels. Women Development Officers are positioned in the outer islands under the authority of their respective Island Secretary's and work to address gender inequality, women's needs, and provide support to women in the outer islands through the island development plans.

The Cook Islands' Constitution came into force in 1964. In Section 64, it guarantees all citizens equal rights and protects citizens against discrimination on the basis of sex. In 2011, the GAD Division with technical assistance from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community developed the Cook Islands National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment & Strategic Plan of Action (2011 – 2016). The Policy specifies six outcomes as the focus of the GAD Division. Cook Islands have ratified CEDAW and acceded to CRC, they have submitted their initial periodic CEDAW report with a national committee in place to oversee reporting and implementation.

Actors

The role of civil society organisations such as the Cook Islands National Council of Women (CINCW) and other actors have proved invaluable to the work on gender equality and women's empowerment in the Cook Islands and have raised a level of consciousness of gender issues across all of Government. Although not fully institutionalized, some Government departments have taken steps to address gender issues within their sectors. Other active CSO's include:

- Punanga Tauturu Inc (PTI)
- Cook Islands Association of NGO's (CIANGO)

Recommendations

The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy outlines a number of outputs and

activities to achieve the six outcomes outlined below. Due to the extensive process of consultation undertaken to inform the development of the Policy, it is recommended that any assistance under the EDF should be channeled through the National Women's Machinery to assist with the implementation of the GEWE Policy, which outlines activities under the following outcomes:

- Gender-responsive Government programs and policies
- Equitable participation of women and men in decision-making and governance systems
- Enabling environment for the full participation of women in economic development
- Improved capacity of women to contribute to climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies
- Improved capacity of women to address health issues
- Elimination of violence against women

Other recommendations to be considered are:

- Support for the enactment of the Family Law Bill
- Addressing employment issues within the private sector through labor law reforms
- Increased coordination between government and civil society and women's groups