

## **REGIONAL INITIATIVE TEMPLATE**

Please complete each section below.

### **1. Contact Details**

Please provide the following contact details:

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### **2. Name of Initiative**

Advancing Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in the Pacific

### **3. Background and Rationale**

*You may consider: What is the issue being addressed by this initiative? What are the causes of this issue? Are there relevant studies that have been carried out to support the issue? Are there links to national, regional or international goals/policies?*

**Please limit your response to no more than 750 words.**

Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) have made significant commitments to advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women, including through ratification and adoption of landmark international and regional instruments such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Revised Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality (RPPA). There is also a growing recognition at the highest level in PICTS governments and Pacific Regional Organizations, and as recognized in the Pacific Leader's Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED) that gender equality is essential for the achievement of sustainable development and for building peaceful, just and equal societies in the Pacific.

Yet, in spite of these commitments, gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched in Pacific societies and progress for women and girls in the Pacific has been extremely slow.

Despite acceleration efforts, the Pacific is not on track to achieve MDG 3 and economic growth rates have been generally low and do not appear to have resulted in significant reductions in poverty, inequality, and vulnerability<sup>1</sup>. Only three PICTs (Cook Islands, Niue, Palau) are on track with MDG 3, while the other PICs can only present mixed results or are off track.<sup>2</sup> Papua New Guinea is not expected to achieve any of the MDG benchmarks. While the focus must remain on girls' education, creative solutions must also be developed to address relatively higher drop-out rates of boys from secondary education.

Although six PICTs report having introduced reserved seats for women candidates in elected bodies, either at the national or local level<sup>3</sup>, the Pacific has the lowest rates of women's political participation and representation in the world and is home to three of the five countries in the world without any women in their lower or single houses of parliament. While women have the right to vote and stand for elections in all Pacific countries, negative gender stereotypes, cultural norms and socio-economic factors continue to limit their political participation and representation at all levels.

Violence against women is a violation of human rights and a public health issue of global proportion. Pacific countries have some of the highest documented rates of violence in the world. 11 PICTs have completed Violence against Women prevalence studies using the WHO methodology. These studies show that up to 68% of women living in the region have experienced sexual or physical violence by an intimate partner<sup>4</sup>, or about twice as much as the global average. Although there has been some progress in developing legislation criminalizing domestic violence as of late, only 9 PICTs have such legislations so far. Access to justice for survivors of violence further remains grossly inadequate across the region, and so does access to quality services.

Although the region has made progress towards achieving universal access to reproductive health, there are still high rates of teen pregnancy in a number of countries<sup>5</sup>, high incidence of sexually transmitted infections/HIV, including among young people (women and men) and sex workers<sup>6</sup>. According to the Pacific ICPD+20 review, most Polynesian countries will achieve MDG 5a by 2015. Micronesian countries show mixed results, but, despite a relatively high percent of births attended by a skilled health worker across the region, most Melanesian countries (where most maternal deaths do occur) will not achieve MDG 5a, including PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Sexual reproductive health and rights remains a critical area requiring attention in the Pacific.

Pacific women contribute significantly in the economic sphere, but they are underrepresented in the formal workforce, and work primarily undertaken by women, namely home-based or focusing on subsistence agriculture, marketing of agricultural products, and petty trading, is highly vulnerable. In the formal sector, women are under-represented in senior level jobs in most PICTs, and where they do find employment opportunities, namely in 'female' occupations such as tourism, garment making and food processing, wages are lower and conditions are poor<sup>7</sup>. Gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment also present significant barriers to women's full participation in employment and

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Common Multi-Country Assessment, June 2012.

<sup>2</sup> 2014 Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report.

<sup>3</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Beijing +20: Review of progress in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action in Pacific Island countries and territories, 2015/

<sup>4</sup> UNFPA/Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Kiribati Family Health and Safety Study, 2010. See: [http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/pacific/2013/07/31/7502/violence against women vaw in the pacific/](http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/pacific/2013/07/31/7502/violence%20against%20women%20vaw%20in%20the%20pacific/)

<sup>5</sup> the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands

<sup>6</sup> PNG

<sup>7</sup> International Labour Organization, Decent Work and Social Justice in Pacific Small Island Developing States, 2014.

lead to social exclusion.

While disasters pose threats to lives and livelihoods of everyone in their path, they tend to have disparate impacts on women and girls. In the Pacific, a region particularly exposed to the impacts of disaster and climate risks, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to increased gender-based violence and displacement and experience unequal access to information. Although there is more awareness about the need for gender, women's participation in preparedness and response, and protection mainstreaming in humanitarian response, there are gaps in programming and in the meaningful participation of women and girls in humanitarian responses. The role of women and women's organizations in natural resources management and climate change adaptation are also inadequately reflected in environmental and climate change strategies.

The lack of gender equality in the Pacific continues to inform women's life experiences, including as young women and girls. Many men and women still believe that the subordinate status of women in the Pacific is mandated by cultural, traditional and religious practices and norms, even though many of these practices and norms reject all acts of violence against women and favour notions of human rights for all<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, partnerships with faith-based organizations hold important entry points for promoting positive transformation toward gender equality.

#### 4. Description

*Please provide a brief overview of this initiative. Try to address the following: Does this initiative contribute to a positive change to the region? What makes this initiative of importance to the Pacific region as a whole? Who would implement this initiative? Who are the main beneficiaries? Are regulatory or legislative changes required at the national level to implement this initiative? How would the initiative be funded? Has this initiative been carried out previously? What are the key risks in implementing this initiative? Are there any complementary projects and programmes currently active? What is the proposed timeframe for this initiative? How would the initiative be sustained over the proposed timeframe?*

**Please limit your response to no more than 750 words.**

Gender equality and the empowerment of women have been widely recognized as being key to the achievement of sustainable development, including all goals to be adopted under the new post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals. Pacific Island countries and territories risk not achieving the Sustainable Development Goals unless gender equality is placed at the heart of the new Framework for Pacific Regionalism.

While advancing gender equality and women's empowerment has been an area of focus of many development partners in the region, from CROP agencies to the United Nations donors and civil society, lack of robust and sustained political momentum, lack of investment at the regional level, and relatively limited technical capacity at the national level has meant that progress has so far been piece meal, slow and uneven.

The initiative being proposed is for Pacific Leaders to prioritize at the regional level the implementation of the global and regional gender equality commitments that they have made with a particular focus on the Gender Equality Declaration under the framework of the gender equality architecture, currently known as the Revised Pacific Platform for Action. Pacific governments can draw from regional strengths - such as regional and international dialogue on gender equality and women's empowerment, information sharing, lessons learned and best practice, South-South exchange, regional innovation and collaboration – to achieve this initiative.

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<sup>8</sup> UNESCO Working Paper. Gender, Intangible Cultural Heritage and Violence against Women in the Pacific, March 2013.

As is well established, gender equality does not only benefit women and girls but societies in their entirety. The World Bank has determined that gender equality is smart economics, enhancing productivity and improving other development outcomes<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, engaging half of the available talent pool has a vast bearing on a country's GDP and competitiveness<sup>10</sup>. With economic growth comes increased security. Prioritizing the empowerment of women and gender equality would therefore benefit the entire Pacific Region. Furthermore, by increasing women's political participation at all levels of decision-making, PICTS will ensure that government programmes and policies are more gender-responsive, meeting the needs of all their citizens. Increasing the economic empowerment of Pacific women will improve economic growth at all levels and across sectors. Increasing women's access to natural resources is a critical element for ensuring their economic empowerment, as well as for reducing vulnerability against climate change impacts. In addition, ending violence against women benefits everyone. There are strong linkages between violence against women and violence against children, both with high rates of prevalence in the Pacific<sup>11</sup>. Thus ending violence against women is critical in ending generational cycles of violence. Preventing violence against women and ensuring access to justice and quality services will improve the quality of life of all Pacific women and girls, contribute to just and peaceful communities and decrease the economic and health cost of violence. Finally, improved access to health services for women and girls including sexual and reproductive health services, and educational opportunities will have a multiplier effect on families and communities.

Comprehensive legislative reform would be required to remove all forms of discriminations against women currently imbedded in national legislations. Such efforts have, however, already started and the initiative could build on recent successes. However, legislative reform is not enough as demonstrated in the many PICTs that have recently passed legislation on violence against women. The focus needs at least equally to be on practical implementation with proper implementing strategies and budgets in place.

This initiative will benefit of the relatively high level of integration already existing on gender work amongst PIFS, SPC, UN agencies and civil society – a network that has already been collaborating around these issues and that has a growing track record of achievements. Key additional partners are national governments, women's machineries as well as development partners.

The initiative will also benefit from the fact that two of the main development partners in the region DFAT and the EU have put gender equality and the empowerment of women as one of their top priorities for their aid, respectively with the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Program and with the new EU-Pacific Framework Agreement in which gender is supposed to be strongly mainstreamed. Some of the actions required under this initiative can further be funded by traditional donor funds and by UN agency programmes. However, some of the funding gaps should also be addressed through effective assistance for implementing gender-responsive budgeting at the national level.

The main risks to this initiative are lack of political will and by-in and resistance from some individuals and groups on the grounds of cultural, traditional, and religious beliefs. Many men and women still believe that the subordinate status of women in the Pacific is mandated by cultural, traditional and religious practices and norms, even though many of these practices and norms reject all acts of violence against women and favour notions of human rights for all<sup>12</sup>.

Complimentary projects include:

- SPC's Human Development Programme;

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, Why is Gender Equality Central for Economic Growth and Operational Effectiveness, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> World Economic Forum, The Case for Gender Equality, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> UNFPA and UNICEF, Harmful Connections: Examining the relationship between violence against women and violence against children in the South Pacific, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO Working Paper. Gender, Intangible Cultural Heritage and Violence against Women in the Pacific, March 2013.

- PIFS' Gender Advisory work;
- RRRT's and OHCHR's work on human rights;
- UN Women's work in Ending Violence against Women, Women's Political Participation and Leadership, Women's Economic Empowerment, and Gender/Climate Change/Disaster Risk Reduction;
- UNFPA's work on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Ending Violence against Women;
- ILO's work on sexual harassment and labour law reform;
- UNICEF's work on ending Violence against Children and Child Protection;
- UNDP's work on women's political participation; economic empowerment, access to justice and legal aid; access to and participation in decision-making pertaining to natural resources; gender and energy assessments, climate change mitigation and adaptation/DRR/Early Recovery;
- Numerous projects and advocacy by Civil Society Organizations;
- Work of various CROP agencies; and
- Work of UN Trust Fund grantees.

The proposed timeframe is 15 years, and is to be sustained through strategic capacity building and mentoring programmes embedded in the projects and initiatives.

## 5. Alignment to Regional Vision, Values and Objectives

*Briefly describe how your initiative supports the vision, values and objectives set out in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism. These can be found in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism document or in the submissions guideline document.*

***Please limit your response to no more than 500 words***

This initiative fully supports the vision, values and objectives set out in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism.

First and foremost, gender equality is at the very heart of **human rights**. It is a fundamental principle of the United Nations Charter adopted by world leaders in 1945, and identified as an aspect of structural discrimination in Pacific UPR cycle 1 and cycle 2 reviews. Discrimination based on sex is prohibited under almost every human rights treaty - including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – of which Pacific Island countries and territories have ratified. Gender Inequality is the single most widespread human rights violation in the world.

Gender equality and women's empowerment is vital to **sustainable development**. Leaders of Small Island Developing States recognized in the S.A.M.O.A. Pathway document that gender equality and women's empowerment and the full realization of human rights for women and girls have a transformative and multiplier effect on sustainable development and is a driver of economic growth in small island developing States<sup>13</sup>. The vital role of women and the need for their full and equal participation and leadership in all areas of sustainable development was also made explicit in the Rio +20<sup>14</sup>. Forging any sustainable development pathway must include an explicit commitment to gender equality, women's empowerment and women's rights in its conceptualization and implementation.

Further, a growing body of research shows that when women work, economies grow. Countries with low rates of gender inequalities in education and employment access have grown substantially faster than those in which inequality rates were high<sup>15</sup>. Promoting women's agency not only boosts economic growth, but also promotes broader

<sup>13</sup> S.A.M.O.A. Pathway, A/CONF.223/3, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Rio +20, A/RES/66/288, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Development Programme, Powerful Synergies: Gender Equality, Economic Development and Environmental Sustainability, 2013.

development with benefits to resilience, climate change, and opportunities to adapt. In the Rio +20 Outcome Document, it states that enhancing social inclusion and human welfare - particularly of women, children, poor and other vulnerable groups - is an important aspect of a green economy, as is maintaining the healthy functioning of the earth's ecosystems, promoting sustained and **inclusive economic growth**, respecting all human rights, and benefiting and empowering all.

Increasing gender equality strengthens **security**. Scholars have found that the larger the gap between the treatment of men and women in a society, the more likely a country is to be involved in intra- and interstate conflict, to be the first to resort to force in such conflicts, and to resort to higher levels of violence<sup>16</sup>. The Forum Economic Security Council has also recognized the differentiated impacts of instability and insecurity on women, men and children, and that women and girls have a unique role to play in conflict prevention and resolution<sup>17</sup>.

Attaining **good governance** is only possible when women are fully able to realize their duties and rights and have access to services as citizens. Policies and public institutions must represent the interest of women and men and promote equal access to resources, rights, and voice.

## 6. Additional Information

*Please provide or attach additional information in support of this initiative.*

***Please limit your response to no more than 5 pages.***

There are multiple high level commitments made by Pacific Leaders in support of gender equality and women's empowerment.

During the Pacific Forum Leaders Meeting in the Cook Islands in August 2012, it was recognized that despite some gains in the area of girls' education and some positive initiatives to address VAW, overall progress in combating gender inequality in the Pacific is slow. Additionally, the lack of women's participation and access to resources and decision making has high social and economic costs from the personal to the community, national and regional levels. For these reasons, the Forum Leaders recommitted to implementing the GE actions of CEDAW, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), ICPD, the Revised Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality, the Pacific Plan and previous Forum Leaders commitments<sup>18</sup>. The Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration was a high level commitment to implement specific national policy actions to progress GE and women's empowerment in the areas of Gender responsive government programmes and policies, decision-making, economic empowerment, ending violence against women, and health and education. Similar to the FEMM meeting, it was agreed that progress in these areas should be reported on at each Forum Leaders Meeting. Pacific Leaders are required to report their implementation of the Gender Equality Declaration annually at the Forum Leaders meeting.

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community recently reviewed the Revised Pacific Platform for Action (RPPA). This Review was the result of a recommendation made by the 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women in 2013. It was a retrospective review of progress made under the Platform, which will be followed by a prospective study that will design an agenda, structure and processes for taking gender equality into the future across the region. The draft review of the RPPA clearly states that a long-term, regional approach to addressing gender equality and women's empowerment is a powerful complement to the Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration. This new approach

<sup>16</sup> Sex and World Peace, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Pacific Regional Action Plan Women Peace and Security, 2012-2015.

<sup>18</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, August 2012.

would focus on national action but rely on regional strengths, information sharing, best practice and collaboration.

In July 2012 the Forum Economic Ministers meeting (FEMM) took place, resulting in an action plan including strong language in support of the economic empowerment of women<sup>19</sup>. Specifically, the action plan recalled the important role of women in economic development and the need to improve women's participation in economic activities; recognized the need for economic dialogue and policy development frameworks to integrate a gender perspective; directed the Forum Secretariat in collaboration with development partners to assist Pacific Island Countries (PICs) to improve the enabling environment for women's economic participation; and urged development partners and PICs to increase support for the compilation and analysis of gender statistics to improve policy advocacy and implementation. The Forum Secretariat was directed to report annually on progress in this regard to FEMM, establishing permanent space for the discussion of the vital role of women in economic development in this forum agenda and making the economic ministers accountable to the issue.

The Moana Declaration recommitted Pacific parliamentarians to strengthening sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) across the region. Representing Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia the declaration envisioned people-centred national development plans that create an enabling environment to ensure access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for all people and without discrimination, the incorporation of sexual and reproductive health-related issues and ending violence against women in development strategies and increased participation of women and young people in decision-making processes.

A Pacific Regional Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) was established in 2010 with members from the Pacific Islands Forum, Council of Regional Organizations in the Pacific (CROP), UN agencies, and civil society. In June 2011, the Forum Regional Security Committee (FRSC) gave the group the policy task of developing a Regional Action Plan (RAP) on WPS, and this was subsequently supported by Pacific Women's Ministers in August of the same year. The RAP has three focus areas: Gender mainstreaming and women's leadership in conflict prevention and management, political decision-making and peace-building and peacekeeping; Gender mainstreaming and women's participation in security sector oversight and accountability and; Protection of women's human rights during humanitarian crises and in transitional and post-conflict contexts. It also sets out a regional mechanism that will support regional and national efforts. In June 2012 the RAP was presented to the FRSC, and it was launched in October. The Forum Leaders welcomed the development of the Human Security Framework for the Pacific.

Of all the Pacific Island Countries and Territories, only 2 have not ratified CEDAW. Ratification of CEDAW is a major step towards the protection of the human rights of women and girls and the eradication of gender-based discrimination. Even though in the Pacific most of the conventions standards have not been translated into enactments in either national legislation or structural changes in asserting women's rights, achievements have been made in legislation reform, increased reporting, and the establishment of human rights mechanisms<sup>20</sup>.

Furthermore, Pacific Leaders are declaring their support of gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of the Post-2015 development framework. At CSW59, sixteen Pacific Island countries declared their support for the Standalone Goal on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women through regional statements delivered by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Pacific Small Island Developing States. In addition, out of the nine Pacific country statements made at CSW, eight supported this goal, as well as called for the mainstreaming of gender in all other Sustainable Development Goals through targets and indicators. Furthermore, Pacific delegations are gaining global recognition for being the most progressive and constructive negotiators in support of the inclusion of important language including on sexual orientation and gender identity in the list of prohibited bases of discrimination, on sexual

<sup>19</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Forum Economic Action Plan, July 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Beijing +20: Review of the progress in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action in Pacific Island countries and territories, 2015.

rights, on comprehensive sexuality education, on women human right defenders, on indigenous women and women living with disabilities and on climate change and gender. This Pacific voice was evident at the 2014 Asia and Pacific Regional Conference on Gender Equality: Beijing +20 Review and in preparation of CSW59.

What can be seen from this evidence is that at the highest levels in the Pacific and across multiple sectors, it is increasingly being recognized that the lack of gender equality in the Pacific is pervasive, progress to address the issues is slow, and the costs to the Pacific people, societies and economies are great. There is mutual agreement that this must change.