

## **Women – the Pacific Potential**

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### **Introduction and context**

The Pacific region stretches over about one third of the earth's surface and is mostly water. Excluding Australia and New Zealand, the Pacific region has a total population estimated at about 6 million, although 5/6 of the population are in one country, Papua New Guinea. Island states vary greatly in size, natural resources, population, culture and languages, degree of political independence, economic viability, and level of development. Nevertheless, as the previous (20<sup>th</sup>) century drew to a close, the Pacific was being acknowledged as a vital part of the world, one that would be the focus of changes that would impact globally in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While there is great potential in the marine resources of the Pacific, the scarcity of land points to the lack of natural land resources. Hence, the region has become reliant upon human resources to a great extent. In many island states, remittances from overseas have formed a substantial part of the national economy. In addition to family members who live overseas and send money back home, some island nations have steady remittances from locally trained seamen working on foreign ships. The latter situation has led to a gender imbalance in these island communities and is likely to have caused some gender inequity in employment. Nonetheless, women have an all-encompassing role of vital significance, socially, culturally, economically, and politically.

This presentation focuses on Pacific island women - the resource at the core of the Pacific potential - and draws from information recently obtained from four countries: Fiji, the Marshall Islands, Samoa, and Tonga.

### **Pacific Women : the potential**

Across the Pacific, women's roles are very similar: women are **home managers, food providers** tending family plantations/food gardens and/or gathering seafood, **caregivers and nurturers** of children, the sick and elderly, **pillars** of the family, church and village, **peacemakers**, informal **educators**, and increasingly, are playing an important role as **income earners** through small businesses or paid employment outside the home, many becoming sole income earners of a household. Furthermore, women are achieving higher levels of education and making inroads where previously no women, or only a few, were able to achieve. There is great potential for women to make a positive impact on Pacific society and improve all aspects of life in the Pacific.

Pacific women have increasingly emerged as **leader/senior managers** in their communities. Samoa has a reasonable track record of leadership positions being occupied by women. In her paper to the joint Samoa Association of Women Graduates (SAWG) - Pacific Graduate Women's Network (PGWNet) 2005 Conference *Creating Opportunity, Realising Potential*, Faamausili Dr Matagialofi Luaiufi, CEO-PSC, referred to the reforms that have created an enabling environment for women. Dr Luaiufi said that the reforms had opened up possibilities for the selection of women to top/senior posts in the public sector, and had allowed women to head ten Government ministries and semi autonomous units (Attorney General, Finance, PSC, Women, Community and Social Development, Health, Samoa Housing, Samoa Qualifications Authority, Legislative, and National Kidney Foundation). At the next level down (Assistant CEOs), she reported that women occupied 40% of the posts. In Luaiufi's view, women were "more committed and worked longer hours". Strategically, more emphasis was placed on qualifications and competencies, resulting in the appointment of more women. In Samoa also, a recent move by government has seen the establishment of women as government representatives in villages (*Sui o le Malo*), equivalent to the existing village mayor position occupied by men. In Fiji, the status of women has improved with an increasing awareness of their rights. In Tonga, particularly in educational opportunities, there is no gender discrimination.

In the private sector, women have become successful **entrepreneurs**. Many family businesses are managed by women, particularly small businesses such as small retail outlets, handicraft, catering and tourism related ventures, such as accommodation, sightseeing tours, and rental cars. Some are managing on a larger scale in, for example, plantations, hotels, and large retail outlets. In Samoa, Fiji, Tonga and the Marshall Islands, women are active in small businesses, many in handicraft production and retail.

An important area in which women have played a vital role is that of **peace and conflict resolution**. Women have played effective peacemaking and peace-generating roles in Papua New Guinea (Bougainville uprising), Solomon Islands (2000 ethnic violence), and Fiji (military coups). Indeed, the current President of the Fiji Association of Women Graduates (FAWG), Dr Akanisi Kedrayate, is the chair of the Fiji Conflict Resolution Committee, a national government body established to find ways to bring about peaceful coexistence in Fiji. In the Solomon Islands, during the 2000-2001 crisis, women were at the forefront in peacemaking efforts, apparently risking their lives in the effort. Similarly, during the PNG-Bougainville crisis in the nineties, the women of Bougainville, according to John Momis:

“demonstrated great wisdom and courage as they refused to submit to threats and abuse inflicted on them by combatants from both sides of the war. They became effective bridge builders and peace makers between the warring enemies as they moved around in the midst of the people promoting respect for human life and reconciliation.” Paper to the *Pacific Regional Inter-religious Colloquium on Indigenous Cultural and Religious Concepts of Peace and Good Governance*, Samoa, Dec 2005.

Whilst throughout the region women play very similar roles in the home, community and the country, there are disparities in their status in Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia. For instance, Polynesian women tend to have a more equitable standing in most areas, and in the matrilineal countries, such as Marshall Islands, land passes through the female bloodline.

In **education**, evidence from the regional University of the South Pacific (USP), an institution co-owned by 12 island states (Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu), enrolment statistics reveal that more women tend to enroll in the Polynesian and Micronesian countries (about 60%) than their Melanesian sisters (about 30%). Fiji is the exception and the proportion is slightly higher than 60%. The outcome is an emerging prevalence of educated women and, in Samoa, women are rapidly becoming the more consistent achievers at **tertiary level**. In turn, the more qualified they are, the more eligible they become for job opportunities and the higher the likelihood that they will fill a post. In the Cook Islands, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and indeed, most Pacific islands, women have consistently achieved in higher education, gaining more qualifications and hence becoming eligible for senior or top level posts.



***Pacific women graduates who were delegates to the 2004 IFUW triennial conference in Perth, Australia.***

***Standing: L-R: Joanne Bose (Solomon Is), Lily Vesikula (Fiji), Agnes Kotoisuva (Fiji), Dr Lia Maka (Tonga), Laeimau Oketevi Tanuvasa (Samoa), Lumaava Funealii (Samoa)***

***Sitting: L-R: Dr Akanisi Kedrayate (Fiji), Leatuaolevao Ruby Vaa (Samoa). Absent: Grayleen Lapi (Vanuatu)***

At USP, Pacific women have risen to senior management level (as Deputy Vice Chancellor, two of three Pro-Vice Chancellors, University Librarian, Professor of Teacher Education, Assistant Dean of Science and Technology, and Head of School of Education). At the National University of Samoa (NUS), women also hold senior management positions: one of the two Deputy Vice Chancellors and also the Head of the Institute of Technology, two of four Professors appointed in 2004, and four of five Faculty Deans. Also in Samoa, at the secondary and primary school levels, the majority of school principals are females. Yes, women graduates are developing, gaining confidence and becoming more and more eligible for leadership and decision-making positions.

As leaders and managers, women have consistently proven that they bring to such roles a balanced outlook based on a sense of fairness, honesty and humanity. It is my view that women are able to do this because they “rule” with both heart and mind. The potential therefore of women leading/managing is great. Hence, expectations are that women will be at the **leadership and decision-making** level.

Despite, however, the seemingly good status enjoyed by women, there are other areas in the island states where the participation of women falls short. In the highest decision-making arena – Parliament - the ratio of women to men is low. Part of this situation is due to disparities in education for some countries. In part, it is also due to the culture argument, quite evident in 2005 in the lead-up to the general elections in Samoa, held in March 2006. In 2005, to encourage, train and motivate women to stand as candidates, the NGO, *Ina'ilau Women's Leadership Network (IWLN)*, a network of several NGOs including SAWG, mounted a programme that was taken to women in the rural constituencies. Much controversy surrounded this effort. There seemed to be some confusion about cultural basics, and, in a country where women are esteemed and hold a special place in society, many took a dim view of women wishing to run for Parliament.

When faced with the question of women running for Parliament, while a positive attitude was observed in some, there was also a strong negative attitude from others (including women) arguing that women were made for family duties and if elected they would neglect this sacred duty. The Bible was often quoted, pointing out that woman was created to support man, and that man was the head of the household and if women became MPs, they would forsake the natural and cultural role they were made for (home duties).

There is a long way to go yet in order to achieve a better representation of women in politics in Samoa. However, given their commitment to anything that they turn their attention to, and a balanced sense of decision-making, women have great potential in the political arena. In her paper to the SAWG-PGWNet 2005 conference, Honourable Safuneituuga Neri Fepuleai, re-elected to a second five-year term, called for more women in Parliament for these reasons. In the Marshall Islands and Tonga, women's participation in the political arena is much lower than in Samoa. Of the four countries, Fiji has the best ratio of women parliamentarians, though it is still quite low. The following table summarises information obtained from Fiji, Marshall Islands, Samoa and Tonga.

**Women in leadership and decision-making positions**

	<b>Fiji</b>	<b>Marshall Is</b>	<b>Samoa</b>	<b>Tonga</b>
Women MPs/senators : total no. MPs/senators	Parliament - 8 : 71 MPs Senate - 6 : 32 Senators	1 : 33 Senators	4 : 49 MPs	1:18 MPs
Women State Ministers	3 Ministers (T=24) 2 State ministers (T=12)	none	2 Ministers (T=14) 1 Associate Min. (T=21)	1
Public Services women CEOs	3 (T=22)	3 CEOs (T=9) 4 Govt units	5 Ministry CEOs 4 Govt Corporation CEOs	2 CEOs

*Source: PGWNet members in Fiji (Lily Vesikula, Akanisi Kedrayate), and Tonga (Salote Fukofuka, Polotu Fakafanua-Pauga ) and potential member in Marshall Islands Irene Taafaki*

At the local government level, the value of women in leadership positions was highlighted at the first Asia-Pacific Summit of Women Mayors and Councillors, Bangkok, June 2001. Kim Hak-Su, Executive Secretary of the Bangkok-based UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) observed that, "If women had an equal share in decision-making in local government, cities in the Asia-Pacific region would be much cleaner, healthier, and friendlier places in which to live". The same gathering also made the following observations:

"Women provide 'transformative leadership' by redefining political priorities, placing new items on the agenda and providing new perspectives on mainstream issues."

"Nowhere in the region are women equally represented in local government."

"Women in local government are the real fighters. You have to encounter more pressure and obstacles than men in the same position"

*Source: Lisa Williams, Pacific Women Resource Bureau, 19/6/2001.*

The influence of the church and Christianity on views, attitudes, and beliefs about the **role of women in the church** is far-reaching and has impacted significantly on society, traditions, and attitudes. The Bible is often quoted when the role of women is discussed. This biblical role has become the authoritative reference point and has blurred with the cultural/traditional role, at least in Samoa. In church matters, it is the common view and expectation that women should play a supportive role to men.

This attitude has been attributed by some to the period when Christianity was successfully integrated into the Pacific, the Victorian times, and was visibly evident in the dress and behaviour expected of Samoan pastors' wives. Such attitudes do not encourage participation at the "decision table". Rather, they perpetuate participation at the "service table". There is some contradiction with Samoan culture, where women are held in special regard, protected by their men-folk, and where families often defer to the wisdom of the oldest woman (the *olomatua*). The matrilineal Marshall Islands have the same deference to women's views and women are the decision-makers in important matters, such as land.

In Samoa, it must be said, however, that in some church matters of the main Christian denomination, women are slowly becoming part of the general decision-making in their parishes (as deacons) and the general assemblies (as parish delegates to annual general meetings). But their representation is still very low in proportion to men and they have yet to become members of the elite elder deacons. However, women are the backbone of parishes, implementing the decisions and ensuring efficient organization of church activities. In this aspect of Samoan community life, women are also displaying their potential.

There remains, however, one area which women have been unable to enter and that is the clergy, as ordained ministers. In Samoa, this is a highly controversial issue. The notion of women as ordained ministers is generally not acceptable, except in the Anglican church. This acceptance is likely due to the perception that the Anglican denomination is for non-Samoans. It will be some time, if ever, before women are accepted as ordained practitioners. However, it is my view that women are natural peacemakers and their caring nature lends itself to pastoral work. There is potential for women in the clergy.

**Women's rights** have been a contentious issue in the Pacific, given the traditional view that women are to "obey" the head of the family (the husband/father). Such a view arose out of the church teachings, and again the Bible is the reference point. Oftentimes, in domestic abuse cases, this view is expressed in support of the abuser. It has been my personal experience that there is a prevalent male attitude, particularly among the less enlightened, that women are to be kept in line and hence deserve the violence they are subjected to. Sadly, these males perceive themselves as speaking with authority on such matters and their view is based on their belief in the teachings of the Christian Bible.

Active advocacy and training by some NGOs, for instance, women graduate groups such as FAWG, SAWG and Association for Tonga University women (ATUW), and others, Fiji Women's Rights movement (FWRM), Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Samoa's IWLN and *Mapusaga o Aiga* (MOA), have led to some positive change in attitudes.

Some island states have established women's ministries, which have been empowering women through workshops and further advocacy. Although there is a long way to go to address an entrenched gender bias and realize the potential of women, a strong start has been made with the widely ratified Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) by Pacific island nations. Throughout the Pacific, training on this very important treaty has been undertaken by ministries and NGOs, including the Fiji-based RRRT. Ratification has occurred, but only full implementation of CEDAW will ensure that women's potential is fully tapped.

Tapping and realizing the potential of women in and of the Pacific must include addressing the many **health issues of women**. At the FAWG 1996 conference on Women, Science and Technology, the first of four sessions was devoted to health issues, including reproductive health, morbidity and mortality, common cancers, and protective measures against STDs. At the 2005 SAWG conference, Health - a Pacific focus, was one of the four sub-themes. The health of women is a vitally important area of concern and much literature and data collected is available.

Women's roles as nurturers and caregivers and now as income-earners mean that women's good health is crucial to the development of the family, the community, the nation. Diseases affecting Pacific Islanders have been changing from communicable or infectious diseases (CDs) to non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Immunisation efforts have to a large extent eradicated many CDs diseases. But NCDs have become an increasing worry. While women's reproductive health has improved with better family planning facilities and easier access to ante/post-natal care, there are areas of particular concern, such as breast cancer and sexually transmitted diseases, not the least of which is HIV AIDS. Data show an increase in the numbers of Pacific women becoming infected with this deadly disease. This is because women are more vulnerable, since they have less control in marital relationships and are at a higher risk in sex-related work, and have less access to health services, especially where health workers are males only.

Work towards addressing HIV AIDS in the Pacific has been admirably carried out by various individuals and organizations, including the regional Secretariat of the Pacific Community, but this work needs to be intensified if the disease is to be stopped at a comparatively early stage. Women have been at the forefront of advocacy against AIDS. Around the Pacific, work by the young Tahitian woman graduate, Marie Bopp Dupont, has been well publicized. In Samoa a

young woman, Peati, infected by her now deceased husband, is prominent in the awareness work of the Samoa AIDS Foundation.

Another equally devastating disease, cancer in women, appears to be on the rise. In Samoa, since 2000, three young women graduates have died from breast cancer. Others have been treated, or are currently undergoing treatment for breast cancer. The incidence seems to be unusually high. Studies have pointed to hereditary links, but perhaps there are other causes that are preventable. For example, in discussing these recent cases, the suggestion has been made of a possible link to physical abuse. It is a notion that could be researched further.

Yet another area of concern for some island states has been raised in a recent survey, which pointed to a trend in the obesity of women, particularly Samoans. With the rise in diabetes and hypertension, this also needs attention. There is no doubt that research and education are necessary if women's health issues are to be addressed.

### Realising the Potential

Advocacy activities provide excellent opportunities for raising awareness. As well, activities that encourage and nurture girls and young women to participate in all arenas can go a long way to helping Pacific women to realize their potential. For example, FAWG, through a project on science education for girls, has been encouraging girls to take science. In Tonga, ATUW has helped young women to attain scholarships to further their education. In Samoa, SAWG is focusing on motivating and encouraging girls and young women to go further in education by donating a dictionary prize to the best all-rounder at the end of the first year of high school. SAWG also supports higher level education through scholarship awards. There is a worry, however, that in doing this, SAWG is actually contributing to the disparity between females and males and there is a plan to research this issue.



SAWG President, Laeimau Oketevi, Scholarship award winner, from National University of Samoa

*Tanuvasa presenting the dictionary prize with donor, US Charge de Affaire, HE Frankie Reed, and*

*to the winner of Papauta Girls School, SAWG members Dr Emma Kruse Vaai Rita Matafeo (far left).*

Throughout Pacific societies, women have shown an ability to build and strengthen their communities through initiative, innovativeness, adaptability, and tenacity. But for many, the opportunities are limited.

It could be said that for a large number of Pacific women there is poverty of opportunity arising from a lack of access, education and the ability to afford what is available. These difficulties are

compounded by attitudes that have developed over time and that are based on confused notions of culture and traditions. Notwithstanding these challenges, many of the issues limiting the participation of women can be resolved through **education and training**. Women Graduate groups need to continue initiatives that provide opportunities for women and girls.

A positive step has been taken by women NGOs at the regional and national levels. The **collaboration** that has occurred has led to strengthened commitment and resolve. National Associations are working to harness the skills and expertise of graduates and to offer help and support to less privileged women and girls. They are also working with their government ministries on national issues (e.g., SAWG and Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development working on CEDAW and CRC). Local **strategic alliances** are being forged and have led to increased visibility of the graduate women associations, greater recognition and credibility, and have resulted in help towards fundraising activities. PGWNet is an example of a regional collaborative effort through which the Pacific Islands groups are being supported and assisted by their New Zealand and Australian friends and “big sisters”. The newly created PGWNet website ([www.pgwnet.org](http://www.pgwnet.org)) promises to be a vehicle through which information and advocacy efforts are shared and widely disseminated. A start has been made in realising the potential of women. Much more needs to be done.



*Participants at the collaborative Pacific women graduates' workshop, IFUW 2004 conference, Perth, Australia, were mostly from PGWNet countries – Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu*

*L-R. Back row: Laeimau Oketevi Tanuvasa-Savea (SAWG), ..... (NZFGW), Lily Vesikula (FAWG), Betty Cuthbert (NZFGW), Grayleen Lapi (Vanuatu Association of Women Graduates - VAWG), ..... (AFUW), Funealii Lumaava Sooaemalelagi (SAWG), ..... (AFUW), Akanisi Kedrayate (FAWG), Lia Maka (ATUW), Agnes Kotoisuva (FAWG).*

*Front row: Beverley Turner (NZFGW), guest participant from Japan's association, JAUW, ..... (AFUW), Leatuaolevao Ruby Vaa (SAWG), Joanne Boso (Solomon Islands Graduate Women's Association – SIGWA).*

## References

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