



Statement by

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On Behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum Group

At the

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Commission on the Status of Women (UN CSW)

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Chair,

I am honored to address the 56th session of the Commission on Status of Women on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum group of countries which are members of the United Nations.

Congratulations on your election and assumption of Office.

I wish to commend the reports of the Secretary General on the economic empowerment of rural women, the role of gender responsive governance institutions and the macroeconomic policy environment report in relation to the situation of women as workers and decision makers. The three reports provide a substantial overview of the theme of this session and are relevant to rural women in the Pacific.

Chair

The Pacific faces persistent gender issues such as gender based violence, low proportions of women in all levels of decision making, under-representation of women in the formal economy, and unaddressed gender dimensions of natural disasters, climate change, food security and access to clean water and sanitation.

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community hosted the 4th Pacific Women's Ministerial in July 2011 and Pacific Women's Ministers discussed and endorsed a range of key issues critical to advancing the regional gender equality agenda, mechanisms to promote the advancement of women;

women's legal and human rights; women's access to health services; and women in the Pacific economy.

Pacific Island society is highly rural. Women's leadership and dynamism is clearly visible at the community and local level however women are not well represented at a national level. Pacific leaders have agreed to intensify efforts to promote women's equal role in decision-making at all levels and to increase the representation of women in legislatures

Women are most active in the rural economy, primarily the informal sector, and in small enterprises in the private sector where they make critical contributions to the household and national economy with their involvement in multiple activities that support and sustain their livelihoods – subsistence farming, cash cropping, fishing, production of handicrafts and small scale businesses. While the general business environment in the Pacific is improving, ensuring secure property rights and access to financial services including credit, remain issues for women.

Agriculture and fisheries are the backbone of Pacific rural economies and technical support and increased capacity is needed if they are to play a key role in rural women's development.

Fishing plays an important role in meeting nutritional needs in communities dependent on subsistence fishing. Fisheries are also a major source of employment for women, especially in processing plants where they making up to 90% of the labour force. In this context women command the lowest of wages, and have limited job security.

Women play a key role in fisheries; a role that is expanding as men move to cities or off-shore activities. More can be done to support women and reduce discriminatory practices.

Agricultural departments, national women's machineries, and non-government organisations have initiated activities to promote and implement sustainable agriculture to improve food production, food security and income generation as part of the Development of Sustainable Agriculture in the Pacific (DSAP) project. A key lesson has been the need to recognise 'community ways of working'.

Sexual and gender based violence is a significant problem in the Pacific with three of the 10 worst countries in the world for violence against women being from our region. In response the Pacific Island Forum Reference Group on Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), supported by Pacific Island leaders and made up of regional experts and development partners, continues to raise awareness, lobby for resources to eliminate violence against women and undertakes in-country consultations.

With the support of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community Regional Rights Resource Team, Vanuatu, Solomons, Samoa and Tuvalu have developed Domestic Violence Legislation with Tonga, drafting a Bill to be considered in the 2012 Parliamentary Session.

In November, 2011, the Australian Government in partnership with the Government of the United States hosted a Pacific Women's Empowerment Policy Dialogue: Stopping Violence Against Women. Participants

recognised the specific context of women in situations where their vulnerabilities are greater, including in rural and remote areas, conflict and disaster affected areas, women with disabilities, women affected by HIV, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

Participants also recognized the importance of adopting a human rights approach to ending violence against women.

There are many other activities that impact on gender policies and strategy in the Pacific Islands. The University of the South Pacific will offer specialized Gender Studies courses from this year. This will help build regional capacity by equipping students with skills, knowledge and research capability in gender studies, advocate for gender justice and critically examine strategies and policies to integrate gender into national, regional and international institutions.

Regional organizations and development partners including the United Nations collaborate on a range of programmes and activities to implement international and regional gender commitments such as CEDAW, the MDG's, the Pacific Platform for Action for the Advancement of Women (PPA) and our national commitments to gender.

The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the United Nations convened 'Mock Parliament' trainings in Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands and Palau in 2011 which have been shown to provide a practical forum to expose women the realities of policy-making and parliamentary engagement.

Chair,

Despite these efforts, women particularly those in rural areas, have become increasingly vulnerable to the effects of poverty. Their heavy responsibilities associated with farming and in-shore fisheries, coupled with the increasing prevalence of female-headed households due to rapid urbanisation of rural men are just some of the hardships faced by Pacific women. Women in remote areas and outlying islands continue to face hardship brought on by lack of access to transport, communication and information. Extreme weather conditions such as the recent flooding and droughts and natural disasters such as tsunamis and hurricanes increase women's vulnerability.

A number of initiatives have been spearheaded by governments to support rural women in economic development. In Tuvalu the Department of Agriculture is involved with the replanting of 'togo' for handicraft purposes and in Tonga, the replanting of mangroves as a strategy to create employment for women as well as prevention of coastal erosion in some of the outer islands.

Micro-finance schemes and training in rural areas continue to be a heavy feature of government activities. Governments have benefitted from partnerships with various non-government and private sector organisations including banks in carrying out initiatives such as understanding credit agreements, applying for credit, managing finances and basic book keeping. In Samoa Women In Business Development Inc (WIBDI), and in Tonga, the Women In Small Enterprises (WISE) and the South Pacific Business

Development Program (SPBD), have facilitated business opportunities for women in the rural areas for both countries.

Government machineries for gender equality and women's empowerment are undermined by a lack of capacity, commitment and resources to effectively implement national gender work plans. This leaves the burden with other offices, national councils for women and civil society in the rural areas working to respond and prevent violence against women, provide support services to victims and undertake gender and human rights training and peace building. Local government offices continue to coordinate and implement key tasks such as the registration of births, deaths and marriages in rural areas and provide limited support in various empowerment activities.

Chair

We as a region, recognise we still have a long journey ahead of us to ensure the empowerment of rural women and the protection of their rights and livelihood. We recognise rural women play a significant role in the economic survival of their families and communities although they are frequently disadvantaged in areas such as land ownership, representation, decent jobs, financial services, health, education and housing to name a few.

We support the outcomes of the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness and the need to accelerate and deepen efforts to collect, disseminate, harmonise and make full use of data disaggregated by sex to inform policy decisions and guide investments, ensuring in turn that public expenditures are targeted appropriately to benefit both women and men.

A concerted effort is needed across the region to address the issues facing women. Member countries are looking at ways in which we can resolve these issues and advance substantive equality for women, including through the development of legislation.

Thank you, Chair.