



Progressing gender equality through education and training

Recommendations from the 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women

(Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 20–24 October 2013)

From 20 to 24 October 2013, more than 200 people met in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, to discuss how commitments towards gender equality in the region have progressed. The overall aim of the conference was to bring together government ministers and senior decision makers, development partners, research institutions and civil society organisations to review and develop strategies for accelerating progress in the achievement of gender equality and women's human rights in our region. This is in line with *The Revised Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality 2005 to 2015* and other regional commitments on gender equality, including most recently the *Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration* of 2012.

12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women

With the theme *Celebrating our Progress, Shaping our World*, the 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women was the biggest on record; representatives of 21 SPC member countries and territories attended. The conference was convened by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and hosted by the Government of Cook Islands.

There are areas of progress in achieving women's human rights and gender equality in Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). More and more countries have adopted laws to protect women and children against domestic violence; there is a better understanding of the need to integrate a gender perspective across all sectors of development; there are new initiatives promoting women's political leadership; overall, women's health and women's access to education are improving; and women's contribution in the economy has started to be recognised. However, there is still a long road to travel before Pacific Island women have all their human rights protected, benefit equally from development outcomes, and can fulfil their aspirations.

The 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women made a number of recommendations regarding the priority areas to accelerate gender equality in the region, notably in the sector of education. This brief presents the regional overview on emerging issues affecting Pacific women and the recommendations from the Conference made through the outcomes document.



Women's access to services – Education

Regional Overview

KEY GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES IN THE REGION

International literature acknowledges that women who have higher levels of education benefit in many ways: they tend to receive higher incomes; have a better standard of living; have fewer, better educated and more well-nourished children; and make more use of health services for their families and themselves than do women with lower education levels. The benefits of education are evidently multigenerational, but a high level of education does not always equate to better employment outcomes for women as a result of traditional expectations about women's work, gender barriers and stereotypes.¹

The 2013 *Pacific Regional MDG Tracking Report*² highlights a number of key issues that are faced by women and girls in the Pacific with regard to access to education. For example, most PICTs have almost achieved gender parity, yet successful completion of primary school and secondary education remains a challenge for several PICTs that are not within the percentage range to achieve gender parity. Issues that also affect enrolment and retention rates amongst girls include: pregnancy, risks associated with travelling to education institutions and centres, early marriage, insecure toilet facilities, risks of harassment and sexual assault from students and teachers, and the direct and indirect costs associated with education.³ The opportunity costs of attending school can also be a factor. Some girls are required to stay at home to care for younger children or older relatives while parents work; whilst other families may need girls to seek employment in order to contribute to family incomes.

1 2013 Pacific regional MDGs tracking report. Prepared by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2013. .

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

These challenges are in addition to access to education concerns for the broader community, which include: increased urbanisation resulting in higher population density and more intensive utilisation of social and physical infrastructure, leading to overcrowding of facilities such as schools; increased poverty, which affects enrolment and retention rates; varied quality of education services; inequitable provision of good quality education to outer islands and remote rural communities; and the growing number of marginalised young people who are disengaged from schooling. Women and girls with disabilities also experience worse access to education and training than their non-disabled peers.

Women and girls also continue to be disadvantaged in technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Access for girls to TVET is limited by current traditional school curricula and career pathway options, which demarcate, through selection methods and study options, the traditional subjects of home economics for girls and technical trades for boys. Whilst scholarships have been allocated to open up opportunities for women and girls in vocational, trade and technical areas at post-secondary and tertiary level, the constraining secondary school context in terms of gender stereotyped curricula and learning pathways defeat the opportunities provided by these scholarships. Access to higher education is also limited by inflexible and outdated entry points prescribed by higher institutions; a lack of recognition of experience and skills gained in the informal sector; scholarship opportunities that limit participation of women and girls to those who have passed certain formal examinations and high level literacy tests; and a lack of curriculum resources, instructors and targeted structured programmes.

There is also a shortage of impact data available regarding women and girl's educational achievement at post-secondary and tertiary education, and the extent of Pacific women accessing scholarships and studying in professional and tertiary programmes. Whilst donors regularly undertake tracer impact studies on award recipients, these are not often disseminated to the public. They are also rarely used for policy development and planning in the prioritisation and awarding of scholarships, both at a regional and national level. More data are needed to contribute to a more accurate picture of Pacific women's and girls' access to education.

While there are a number of concerns regarding education for women and girls, it must be noted that, conversely, some PICTs, including Samoa, Fiji and Kiribati, have a reverse gender issue, where girls stay at school longer than boys and achieve better results. In Samoa, significantly more boys than girls are at risk in literacy and mathematics, according to standardised tests.⁴ The University of the South Pacific also has more female than male students and graduates. The question this situation poses is whether these educational achievements will later be translated into employment outcomes.

One mechanism that seeks to guide and monitor initiatives in the region in addressing access to education and the quality of education is the Pacific Education Development Framework (PEDF) 2009–2015. One of its three strategic goals is: 'to achieve universal and equitable participation and access to Pacific education and training'. The framework is grounded in two sets of imperatives. First, on the commitments made by Pacific countries to global education calls for action and, second, the national and regional response to the specific needs and challenges of education in the Pacific region. Global commitments include the Education for All agenda and goals, the Millennium Development Goals relating directly or indirectly to education, the United Nations Literacy Decade and also the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

An additional mechanism is the Pacific Qualifications Framework and the Pacific Register of Qualifications and Standards, managed by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), through the Secretariat of the Pacific Board for Educational Assessment. This aims to address challenges in relation to access to education, based on inflexible entry levels for higher level education for women and girls. It provides a basis for equivalent qualifications, recognises skills and experience, and enables portability of qualifications across different educational and professional domains in the Pacific region.

4 Samoa Ministry of Education, *Sports and Culture, Educational Statistics Digest* (2010) < http://www.spc.int/prism/images/EducationDigests/SAMOA/Samoa_Stats_Digest_2010.pdf > at 3 October 2013.



UPDATE ON NEW AND ONGOING INITIATIVES

Since the 11th Triennial Conference, a number of initiatives have begun in the region, or have been ongoing. In 2011, Pacific Leaders at the 42nd Pacific Islands Forum reaffirmed their commitment to raising educational standards, expanding vocational and technical training, and improving participation rates. Leaders welcomed Australia and New Zealand's announcement that they would work to ensure 500,000 more children in the Pacific are enrolled in school and that 75 per cent of children can read by the age of ten by 2021. In 2012, the Forum Education Ministers' Meeting was held to discuss sustainable equality education and the progress made under PEDE. It was found that, whilst progress had been made, there are still challenges in access to education, particularly for remote communities; narrow learning pathways through national curriculum, which limits opportunities for women and girls to engage in education that suits their interests and capabilities; and the gender issue, which relates to the trend in boys' performance and enrolment.

Although not specific to women and girls, a key initiative in the region since the 11th Triennial Conference has been that of the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) in 2012, which was used to set literacy and numeracy baselines amongst PICTs. A regional sample of about 27,000 Pacific Island pupils completing four and six years of primary schooling in 2012 in 14 countries was selected to be part of the assessment. All pupils who completed four and six years of primary education were target populations in the smaller countries, while a stratified cluster random sample of about 2000 pupils from each year level was taken in the seven larger countries. The key finding and conclusion is that the literacy and numeracy situation across PICTs is facing significant challenges. Seven in every ten students (70.8%) completing six years of formal primary school fail to acquire literacy skills expected at the end of six years' schooling and five in every ten students (51.8%) in the case of numeracy, relative to the indications in the regional benchmarks for literacy and numeracy.



AusAID, regional universities and international agencies have been addressing the lack of resources and trained staff in the region in relation to climate change, non-communicable diseases, human security and TVET by offering research scholarships, curriculum and resource development, and training of trainers. A pilot programme for train-the-trainer and resource development work was undertaken in 2012 by GIZ, SPC and national education systems in Tonga and Vanuatu. The programme has resulted in 57 women trained in climate change mitigation responses at SPC's Community Education Training Centre alone, and more in Tonga and Vanuatu.

Country initiatives have also taken place. For example, in 2010, Papua New Guinea (PNG) abolished school fees for the initial three years of schooling. Girls generally have experienced lower rates of enrolment in primary education than boys. A preliminary analysis of this approach since its implementation has shown that this initiative has increased primary school enrolments, particularly for girls. Tuvalu has also adopted an accelerated approach to improving the quality of education to address key concerns in meeting Millennium Development Goal 2, including issues related to lack of gender perspectives in service delivery. Interventions are in accordance with the Tuvalu Education Strategic Plan 2011–2015, and include developing and implementing professional standards for teaching staff, developing and implementing outcomes-based curricula, and implementing a standardised assessment for monitoring literacy and numeracy. Lastly, Tonga's Ministry of Education is currently implementing a gender audit of curricula to eliminate gender stereotypes.⁵

5 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2013 Pacific Regional MDG Tracking Report* (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Fiji, 2013).



Recommendations from the 12th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women

Education is vital for women's empowerment, and also benefits families, communities and economies. The *2013 Pacific Regional MDG Tracking Report* highlighted the achievement of gender parity in most PICTs, yet this remains a challenge for several PICTs. Issues affecting enrolment and retention rates amongst girls include pregnancy, travel to school risks, early marriage, insecure toilet facilities, risks of harassment and sexual assault, and costs associated with education. Women and girls with disabilities experience worse access to education and training than their peers without disabilities.

The conference:

1. Called for PICTs to adopt measures that ensure that girls have equal access to primary, secondary and tertiary education, especially in rural and remote areas, and areas of great hardship.
2. Called for PICTs to adopt measures that promote respect for the safety of women and girls in the school environment, including measures to prevent as well as to respond to SGBV.
3. Encouraged training and education institutions to expand choices for women and girls in accessing technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and higher education.
4. Called for PICTs to put in place inclusive policies to accommodate pregnant young women and mothers to complete their education.



5. Requested countries and CROP agencies to support greater research and gender analysis with strategies to address the root causes of the lower retention and achievement rates of boys in some PICTs.
6. Called for PICTs to disseminate data regarding Pacific women's access to education and to support initiatives that address all barriers – civil, political, social, cultural, economic and physical – faced by women, young women, and girls, including those with disabilities, to access all levels of education.
7. Supported improvements in the quality of education towards strengthening literacy and numeracy rates, and noted that SPBEA and Forum education ministers have initiated work in this area.
8. Called for PICTs to review school curricula and all teaching materials in order to eliminate gender stereotypes and all forms of discrimination.
9. Called for PICTs, with the support of CROP agencies and development partners, to implement initiatives for (a) the ongoing professional development of teachers and vocational trainers, and (b) a core basic teacher training programme that includes compulsory areas in family health and comprehensive sex education, counselling and working with those with special needs.
10. Requested the Forum Education Ministers' Meeting, and all other regional ministerial fora, to include a gender perspective in the development of all education policies and programmes.
11. Requested CROP agencies to provide research on the quality of training and professional development, particularly in the area of health education.

12. Called on PICTs to conduct research into the obstacles to women's access to decent work, even after investments made in higher level and tertiary studies, and identify links between higher education and employment outcomes for women.
13. Requested that all school buildings improve access to people with disabilities on their campuses and in their distance learning programmes.
14. Requested PICTs' education systems to include climate change and gender in school curricula.

The Conference also made recommendations on the mechanisms to promote the advancement of women, targeting all sectors of development. The following are relevant for the sector of education:

The conference:

1. Acknowledged ongoing regional work to compile gender indicators and supported the establishment of a regular monitoring and reporting system across sectors in all PICTs.
2. Acknowledged and supported ongoing capacity building of national statistics offices, planning departments and sectoral agencies of governments, including national women's machineries (NWMs) to collect, analyse and use gender statistics, and urged SPC to increase capacity to supply training and technical assistance to all PICTs to improve their statistics on gender.
3. Supported capacity development of NWMs, other government institutions, and civil society organisations on gender mainstreaming, and called on PICTs to enhance support for the capacity development and adequate resourcing for NWMs to support the process of gender mainstreaming.

For further information contact Brigitte Leduc, Gender Equality Adviser, SPC (brigitte@spc.int)

February 2014

