



Mr. Luke Simpkins MP  
Chair, Human Rights Sub-Committee  
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Dear Mr. Simpkins,

**Re: Submission by the Australian National Committee for UN Women and UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office on Human Rights for Women and Girls – Indian Ocean-Asia Pacific Region**

On behalf of the Australian National Committee for UN Women and UN Women I would like to thank you for the efforts of the Human Rights Sub-Committee to identify critical human rights challenges for women and girls in the Indian Ocean-Asia Pacific Region. It was a pleasure to come to Parliament on Tuesday to meet you all and to find how engaged and knowledgeable you were in the issues under discussion.

I would like to take the opportunity to review the main points of our submission.

Barriers to Human Rights of Women and Girls in the Indian Ocean-Asia Pacific Region:

**Low levels of women's leadership:**

- Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) have the lowest levels of representation of women in parliaments and local governments globally.
- One of the key issues is challenging gender norms and another is about supporting women to take on leadership roles and reduce the burden of unpaid work.
- There are five elections in the Pacific Region in 2014 (Fiji, Cook Islands, Tonga, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu).
- UN Women is investing in training for women candidates and seeks to scale up successful initiatives piloted in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. The program, which includes training for leadership skills development, campaigning, policy making, public speaking and fundraising, requires an additional \$2.6 million to roll out across the region between now and 2018.

**High levels of violence against women and girls:**

- Violence against women and girls (VAW) in the Indian Ocean-Asia Pacific region is among the highest in the world. Women and girls with disabilities are especially vulnerable.
- Australia is regarded as a world leader in developing initiatives to reduce VAW, for example the National Action Plan, investment in benchmarking research, and technical expertise.
- The UN Women Pacific Trust Fund addresses community needs through small grants to local women's organisations, and this has proved a successful model.
- An innovative program to end VAW in the Solomon Islands, which brings together UN agencies, the Government and civil society, has not received the expected funding from DFAT. UN Women is managing the initiative, which involves six UN agencies, and is uniquely placed to liaise with all parties because of its status as a UN entity, its close relationship with the Government and its technical expertise.
- UN Women is seeking \$5 million to close the funding gap and roll-out its programs across the region.



**Lack of access to justice:**

- Many countries in the region function under a dual legal system: the formal justice system based on written law and the informal justice system based on customary practice.
- Many PICT countries have improved their legal frameworks and protections for women but the implementation of laws remains a significant barrier.
- UN Women is analyzing national laws in the region to see how well they comply with CEDAW.
- Women's access to justice is limited and UN Women is seeking \$3 million to strengthen existing ways that women can access justice, and provide training and education to men and women to support this.

**Limited economic opportunities:**

- PICTS are estimated to have the second highest rates of vulnerable workers of all developing country groupings.
- Most rural and outer island economies are still semi-subsistence, with women usually performing a greater share of food growing and inshore fishing activities, which limits their availability for formal employment.
- UN Women's major investment in the region has been the Markets for Change program, of which DFAT is the major donor. This is a six-year project that was launched in 2013 and which will cover Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. This provides safe spaces for women vendors and UN Women has partnered with one of the banks to support 150 women to open bank accounts and is delivering financial literacy training to vendors.

UN Women's programs have shown that relatively small investments, when effectively targeted and designed with substantial input from communities, and particularly women in the communities, provide robust and sustainable returns by increasing incomes and improving health and education outcomes.

With regards to specific queries directed to the National Committee during our meeting on Tuesday:

**Follow-up to women candidates who have successfully gained public office:**

- UN Women had a follow up consultation in April 2014 in Vanuatu with 40 of the women who had attended a Transformational Leadership training workshop the previous December. Five of the participants were successful candidates, who shared their experience of being elected officials. The five women had formed a cross-party team and had elected a leader. They had identified opportunities for cooperation presented by their official roles, which spanned several key committees including Finance, Town Planning, Health and Education, Central Market, Environment and Public Works. The women confirmed that the training had given them the self-confidence and networking skills to build alliances and manage their roles. They identified challenges including the absence of office space, collaboration across party lines and, in one instance, a candidate who did not belong to a major party being told that as she held a reserve seat she did not have the same status as her male colleagues.
- While recognising that they had been in office less than six months, the group questioned the five councillors on progress made in addressing key socio-economic issues which had been identified in December. These included the poor market infrastructure and the lack of transparency in the management of market vendor fees/contributions to the municipal government. The councillors outlined their activities and the challenges they faced, and some admitted to sometimes feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work which they faced. They were reassured by wider group that they were there to support them.
- The five officials stressed the importance of time management, team work and networking and the group discussed how to establish and sustain the women's network which they had proposed in December.

- Party members identified steps that they had taken within their parties to strengthen women's leadership roles - some senior party members shared their efforts to establish women's arms within the two main parties. There was also a proposal within the governing party to establish national-level women's quotas. These successes were celebrated and the group endorsed the importance of networking beyond individual party frameworks.
- UN Women has been following up to find tangible ways to support the network without creating dependency.

**What more could be done if funding was available?**

As part of the Advancing Gender Justice in the Pacific programme UN Women proposes the following initiatives to support women who have been elected in Pacific governments (also provincial and/or municipal levels) as well as those who were strong candidates and wish to remain engaged:

- A Capacity Strengthening Desk for Women Representatives to provide the following support:
  - a) Staff will reach out to women representatives bimonthly in the first year of their term and/or provide technical support to strengthen management and leadership capacities. The service will not include support of a political nature. After the first year the elected official will decide on bimonthly or quarterly support for year two until the end of term.
  - b) Monthly updates sent to women candidates and interested male parliamentarians sharing successes, better practices as well as global advancements in gender responsive governance.
- The establishment of a Gender Resource Centre in Parliament similar to the one set up by UN Women with UNDP and DPKO support in Timor Leste. GRC supports capacity building of male and female parliamentarians by offering resources and training where outside learning opportunities for them are limited. In the course, they learn gender aspects of these issues and as a result in Timor Leste male parliamentarians are becoming gender advocates. GRC is now being transferred to the government, which is committing funds from the national budget.
- Create a regional and international platform for peer-to-peer mentorship and collaboration for those women representatives who are interested.

**Australian Migrant Workers' Program:**

With regards to one of the questions raised on the Migrant Worker Program, the Australian National Committee for UN Women recognises the important role of remittances to PICT economies; however as a development-focused organisation we do not feel that it would be appropriate to prioritise informal and temporary labour in Australia among women jobseekers in the Pacific region. This is because of the specific risks that women migrant workers face, as well as the lack of access to education and other services necessary to set them on a career path that would lift them and their families out of poverty once they return to their communities.

Once again I would like to thank you on behalf of the Australian National Committee for UN Women for taking the time to review our submission and develop such considered reflections on our proposals.

Sincerely,

**Julie McKay**  
Executive Director  
Australian National Committee for UN Women