Participating in economic activities allows women to effect positive changes in their own lives and their communities, with positive ripple effects for the whole nation.

Historically, gendered norms, behaviours and social relations have played a big part in disadvantaging women economically. Institutions, systems and structures often restrict women’s economic opportunities, while gendered roles and status can limit women’s voices and choices when it comes to household and community decisions. Women often also have reduced access to education and skills, as well as other resources such as credit and land.

As small and geographically dispersed countries far from international markets, Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) face volatility in economic growth and prices as well as issues in achieving economies of scale, increasing labour productivity and gaining access to markets.

The Pacific region’s average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is the third highest of all the regions in Asia and the Pacific, but there are a number of other factors to consider. While the World Bank considers Nauru and Palau to be upper middle income countries, the United Nations (UN) classifies Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Tuvalu as “least developed countries” based on their low incomes, economic vulnerability and weak human resources.

Pacific populations are mainly rural and rely largely on subsistence activities; women especially are heavily involved in informal economic activities. Much of this falls outside the formal economy and is therefore not represented by GDP.

The region is also particularly vulnerable to the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, as well as other aspects of climate change, making food security a growing concern. As as result, some economies in the Pacific are likely to shrink rather than grow.

At an aggregate level, PICTs are estimated to have the second highest rates of vulnerable workers (in the subsistence economy, working for family, own account workers or in the informal economy) of all developing country groupings. Pacific women are more likely than men to be in vulnerable work (84% versus 71%) while also balancing the lion’s share of unpaid domestic work and caregiving with lower average earnings.

**WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AT A GLANCE**

**Timeframe:** 2013-2017.

**Key project:** Markets for Change (2014-2019).

**Countries:** Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu.

**Key Partners:** Market vendors, government departments, local councils.

**Funding sources:** UN Women core funds, Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, UN Women National Committees of Australia and New Zealand.
WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

UN Women’s strategy for women’s economic empowerment recognises that economic growth in PICTs is often uneven and is particularly vulnerable to disaster-related shocks. There are also insufficient formal sector job opportunities to absorb the emergent labour force.

Rural areas and outer island economies in most PICTs are still semi-subsistence and markets in both rural and urban areas are central to the livelihoods of a majority of the people, particularly in poorer households. The economic situation is also influenced by strong family and community ties and traditional obligations linked to communal land tenure.

Women usually perform a greater share of food growing and in-shore fishing activities, limiting their availability for formal employment, however, they dominate many small-scale market operations. Between 75% and 90% of all market vendors in the Pacific are women; hours are long, profits are often low, and conditions difficult.

UN Women’s Markets for Change (M4C) project targets market vendors, improving their lives and increasing their economic activity to a point where they are essentially running small enterprises and can consider formal sector employment or business opportunities in the agriculture, retail and hospitality sectors. Improving economic and social outcomes at marketplaces is also expected to improve efficiency along farm to market supply chains and reduce food wastage, increasing revenues for vendors and councils alike.

Exposing market vendors to new business models through training, south-south exchanges and other learning opportunities held on market premises means the women don’t need to leave their place of business to attend. This helps to keep turnouts high and is therefore a far more efficient and cost-effective strategy for strengthening capacity and teaching financial literacy.

UN Women also plans to support governments and businesses in enhancing the role that the state plays in providing social protection beyond health and education.

CASE STUDY: MARKET VENDORS AND BANK ACCOUNTS

Male and female market vendors in Solomon Islands are often restricted from, or hesitant to, open savings accounts due to the banks’ strict criteria and complicated processes. Instead they often keep their money at home, increasing the risk of theft and violence, as well as making saving a challenge.

In an effort to strengthen the money management capacity of women market vendors at the Honiara Central Market (HCM), UN Women facilitated a partnership between Bank South Pacific (BSP) and Honiara City Council (HCC).

In August 2013, rather than requiring vendors to come into the branch, UN Women negotiated for BSP to take its services to the market. The HCC then facilitated the issuing of papers that allowed the bank to waive identification and other requirements. This partnership led to more than 150 market vendors opening bank accounts.
MARKETS FOR CHANGE

The M4C project officially launched in Fiji and Solomon Islands in April and May 2014 respectively, and is due to launch in Vanuatu later in the year.

It builds on experience gained through the Partners Improving Markets series of pilot projects implemented by UN Women from 2009 to 2012, as well as local initiatives and entry points for change identified in country-specific initiatives.

The project will inject more than US$11 million into making markets in the three countries safer, more inclusive and non-discriminatory. The bulk of this funding has come from the Australian government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The project capitalises and builds on UN Women’s existing working relationships with local governments throughout the Pacific. This includes nine municipal councils in Fiji, one city council and one provincial government in Solomon Islands, and two municipalities and one provincial government in Vanuatu.

Over the next six years, M4C will focus on four key areas:

- **Representative marketplace groups**: Empowering women market vendors to organise and participate in marketplace governance and decision-making as a unified community.

- **Socio-economic security of market vendors**: Partnering with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to assess and respond to the rights, needs and interests of market vendors and deliver appropriate services, training and interventions.

- **Local government and market management**: Working with both sectors to build capacity and draft, adopt and implement bylaws, policies and budgets that ensure safe and secure market infrastructure, adequate amenities and services, and transparent revenue collection and expenditure.

- **Physical infrastructure and operating systems**: Working with the relevant stakeholders to improve at marketplaces to make them safer, more sustainable, resilient to disaster risks and climate change, and more accessible.
SOLOMON ISLANDS

UN Women, with the assistance of its New Zealand National Committee, supported the refurbishment and upgrade of sanitation facilities in Honiara Central Market (HCM). The project carried out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of HCM site addressing issues of poor sanitation and ablation facilities, including the market and seafront area. Based on the EIA report’s recommendation, a structural plan for the refurbishment and upgrade of sanitation facilities is currently being undertaken.

FIJI

A mapping exercise undertaken from April to August 2013 on women representation in existing market vendor associations in Suva, Nausori, Sigatoka, Nadi, Namaka, Rakiraki and Tavua provided disaggregated data and information that will assist the M4C team to address the identified gaps and challenges.

In Sigatoka UN Women, with the support of its Australian National Committee, has partnered with the local council in the construction of 42 new market stalls and a fence around the market infrastructure. This has provided market vendors with protection from weather conditions and has increased security for 700 market vendors who were previously vulnerable to theft.

VANUATU

The Shefa Provincial Local Government has worked in partnership with UN Women and its Australian National Committee to provide an entire new market building for the fresh produce market vendors. The new market at Marobe will allow between 100 and 150 market vendors to sell their produce from one location. Previously many vendors used to operate from illegal, makeshift structures along the roadsides and often used to spill over onto the footpaths and walkways of the Port Vila Market.

The Rakiraki Town Council and UN Women have worked to extend the sanitation and ablution block at the market, providing higher quality and safer facilities for almost 250 market vendors.

The addition of water storage tanks in Tavua, along with improvements to drainage systems, have provided vendors with water reserves and sanitation facilities for use during regular water disruptions or flooding.

The overhead roof extension at Labasa market gives 120 market vendors protection from weather conditions.

FOOTNOTES


CAPTIONS

Page 1: Un Women staff collect baseline data at Honiara Central Market, Solomon Islands, 2013. Credit: UN Women/Marni Gilbert.

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