

SEXUAL AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN THE PACIFIC

PACIFIC LEADERS: CHANGE THE LIGHTS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS



Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and girls is a widespread and systematic violation of fundamental human rights and an enduring form of gender based discrimination.

The rates of violence against women and girls in the region are amongst the highest in the world. Recent studies highlight that in many Pacific Countries over two thirds of women have been abused.

In Samoa, 85% of abuse victims advised they never asked any formal agency for help. Of these, 86% had not sought help because they thought such abuse “normal,” or not serious enough.

In the Solomon Islands two in three women between the ages of 15-49 have been abused, while 55% of women have been forced into sex against their will.

In Papua New Guinea 67% of wives have been beaten by their husbands and 60% of men interviewed in a survey reported having participated in “lainap” (gang rape) at least once.

A Kiribati survey found 68% of respondents had been subject to sexual and/or physical abuse.

Discrimination against women is pervasive in almost all spheres of Pacific societies, especially in the way women are treated in law, with few countries possessing legislation outlawing gender-based violence, and in the practical implementation of laws, policies and customs. This absence of domestic legal protection for women is compounded by the absence of female representation within Pacific parliaments.

Some Pacific constitutions fail to prohibit discrimination based on “sex” or “gender” and in those countries whose constitutions do prohibit discrimination, it is not enforced.

Cultural biases and strongly held patriarchal and conservative religious views play a critical role in disempowering women and confining them to subordinate roles.



Women pictured by Amnesty International during a visit to Port Vila, Vanuatu, in August 2010. © Josephine Latu.

THE COMMITMENT

In 2009 a milestone was reached when leaders at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting in Cairns committed to ending violence against women.

For the first time in 40 years, this widespread issue was taken seriously by high-level officials. Violence against women was recognised as a risk to human security and a potential destabilising factor for communities and societies alike.

In the Forum Communiqué leaders:

- reaffirmed support for ongoing action to raise awareness of the seriousness of SGBV and its impact on the Pacific,
- welcomed and supported efforts and important contributions at the local, national and regional levels to address SGBV,
- committed to eradicate SGBV and ensure all individuals have equal protection of the law and equal access to justice.

In 2010 at Port Villa, Vanuatu, the Pacific Islands Forum leaders supported the initiative of the Forum Regional Security Committee to recommend the establishment of a Reference Group on SGBV to assist the Forum Secretariat and support national efforts to combat violence against women in the Pacific.



THE PROGRESS

There is positive rhetoric about constitutional, legislative and societal change from male-dominated Pacific governments, yet progress to address sexual and gender based violence has been stop/start.

High rates of violence continue to undermine the peace and security of women and their communities, compromising their human rights.

Risk factors increase the likelihood of women being subject to violence—where men have economic and decision-making power in the household, where women are excluded from representation, when they lack knowledge of their rights and when national frameworks aren't in place to ensure their protection from harm, that justice is brought to the perpetrators and that women receive adequate compensation for the violation of their rights.



A resident of Wuangima with the charred remains of her house, Porgera, Papua New Guinea, 2009.

Regionally

The Reference Group to address sexual and gender-based violence is made up of a number of Pacific experts on SGBV in the region.

The Reference Group met in Suva, Fiji in November 2010 and Nuku'alofa, Tonga in March 2011 to conduct country visits and discuss issues pertaining to SGBV; including existing work to address the issue by the different agencies across the Pacific.

Nationally

Since 2009, countries in the region have made statements of their commitment to tackle SGBV. Initiatives include:

- Solomon Islands has launched a nation-wide study on violence against women,
- Kiribati signed a 10 year action plan to end SGBV,
- Cook Islands is reviewing draft policy on gender equality and development.

However, there is still a significant amount of work to be done to protect Pacific women and provide access to justice.

Most Pacific Island countries do not have stand-alone legislation combating gender-based violence.

Gender based violence is symptomatic of widespread discrimination against women in the Pacific, much of which is perpetuated by inadequate and outdated legislation.

Some Pacific constitutions fail to prohibit discrimination based on “sex” or “gender” and in those countries whose constitutions do prohibit discrimination, it is not enforced.

At least eight Pacific countries currently have draft legislation that has been developed but until that legislation is enacted into law, protection of Pacific women remains an intangible aspiration.

THE CHALLENGE

Rates of SGBV remain among the highest in the world.

Amnesty International challenges Pacific Island leaders to change the lights on women's rights. They must turn their willingness to recognise the importance of eradicating SGBV into concrete action.

It is fundamental that the work of non-governmental organisations and government ministries in the region is not lost.

Real protection for women is only guaranteed when a legal framework is created that:

- Prevents discrimination,
- Punishes offenders of sexual and gender based violence,
- Provides protection and compensation to

>>>> WORDS TO ACTION >>>>

Leaders must now change the lights and turn words into action by:

- **Completing comprehensive draft legislation to specifically address SGBV,**
- **Enacting that legislation to ensure policy initiatives are followed and protection is available,**
- **Repealing laws that discriminate against women.**

DEMAND DIGNITY

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Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

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