

# Palauan Senator encourages women's economic independence

Palau

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At the third [Pacific Women’s Parliamentary Partnerships forum](#), Pacific Women had the opportunity to meet with Pacific women parliamentarians gathered for the three-day forum to discuss ways to address gender equality.

Senator Jerrlyn Uduch Sengebau Senior shares her experience of advancing gender equality and working with young people in her country Palau, as a member of the Senate.

Tell us a little bit about yourself...

I was elected into the Senate in January 2013. Our system in Palau is modelled after the United States where we have the Executive Branch which is headed by the President of the Republic; the Legislative Branch which is made up of two Houses, the House of Delegates and the Senate. The Senate is elected by voters nationwide, whereas members of the House of Delegates come from 16 States, where a delegate is elected per State. And we also have the Judiciary.

Prior to becoming a Senator, I had a law practice. I still continue with my law practice but in a limited capacity. Before going into private practice, I was a judge in the Land Court, which is a court of limited jurisdiction dealing with cases of land ownership. I was also part of the Attorney General's Office where I did a little prosecution.

I come to the Senate with a legal background. It's a tough job but I love it. Of all the different careers that I have had, I have to say this is the one I enjoy the most because it I get an opportunity to really connect with the people.

What is the status of women in Palau when it comes to violence against women and empowerment?

The Family Protection Act was passed by our previous Government. I wasn't part of the Senate then but my involvement since then has been in creating awareness around it. I also work with the Palau Bar Association, whose members are lawyers practicing in Palau, to disseminate information.

You will find that we are a matrilineal society where women are traditionally very strong. In our traditional system, it is the women who appoint a man to become the chief of their clan. It's only since 1981 when we adopted a constitutional government that things changed from the traditional way of appointing leaders. And it's also very recent since women became part of the democratic constitutional government. The House of Delegates has had only one woman delegate and that was in the very first House of Delegates, so it's been over 30 years since we've seen a woman in there!

Out of the 29-member Congress, we only have three members that are women and they are all senators. So we do need a lot of assistance in taking the work forward.

Tell us about your experience being part of the Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnership forum...

Every time I come to the forums, I am so inspired. Following the forum in 2013 in Sydney, I went back and we established a non-profit NGO called Centre for Women's Empowerment Palau. My hope is for this organisation to

grow because it's really meant to support women in leadership positions and uplift the status of women in Palau. We're looking for funding to open a resource centre for women.

In 2014 after the forum in Tonga, I helped establish a network with state legislators working at the sub-national level in the 16 States. We meet every other month and offer support and advice to each other. I am very happy to report that this month [April] we visited the community of one of the state legislators to create awareness and answer questions on the Family Protection Act. Once I go back from here, I am going to continue to make arrangements to go to the different communities and ensure that discussions on the Family Protection Act are part of those programs.

But it's only since this year that I have really started working on eliminating domestic violence. I have talked about the Family Protection Act, I have talked about the law but the commitment to move forward with it, to talk about it all the time did not start until this year and is now reinforced by the forum. And this is one of the reasons why I am very much grateful to the Australian Government for making these forums possible because each year that I come, I am so inspired and I go back to Palau and work on activities or projects for women.

For example, when I get back home at the end of this week, another Senator and I will be doing a radio show on Friday 8 May because Mothers' Day will on that Sunday on 10 May. We will be using this opportunity to talk about violence against women and the importance of educating girls.

But I was very much involved with women's projects prior to this. With my legal background, I also help the women in the communities create their own non-profit NGOs so they can have access to grants in the area of climate change and food security to help them revive their taro patches which were destroyed in typhoons.

What's the situation in Palau like when it comes to education for girls?

There are no problems with access. Palau's population is only around 20,000 and girls are educated very much like the boys.

But here is the problem. I really liked what I heard today in one of the discussions about the importance of encouraging girls to get an education and become economically independent. That was my uncle's advice to me. In our culture, my mother's brothers have a lot of influence in our lives. We are encouraged to listen to them and respect them. My uncle, who has since passed away, advised my sister and me very early on, to get an education, so that if we ever had problems in our marriage, we would be able to get out of it because we are economically independent. And we would also be able to take care of our children. That's very powerful advice and I think it should be emphasised to all girls.

Unfortunately, we do have problems with child sexual abuse especially molestation of girls in Palau, as well as high rates of juvenile delinquency. For the past two since I have been part of Congress, we've been working hard to reduce crimes committed by young people. I am committed to putting in a Juvenile Diversion Program in court, which would help us address this. Citizens' of Palau are allowed to enter and work in the United States under our Compact of Free Association arrangement but not if they have a criminal record. So it is really important for us to lower the rates of juvenile delinquency, as well as focus on rehabilitation, so the future of our young people is not jeopardized.

To know more about the forum, read the [Outcomes Statement](#) here. To learn more about the views of other Pacific parliamentarians on gender equality and the status of women in the region, read reflections from [Governor Julie Soso Akeke](#) (Papua New Guinea), [Minister Charmaine Scotty](#) (Nauru), [Minister Freda Soraicomua](#) (Solomon Islands) and [Senator Magdalena Walter](#) (Federated States of Micronesia).