

Legal aid for survivors of domestic violence in the Cook Islands

Cook Islands

SHARE

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A new joint initiative is making legal aid available for domestic violence survivors in the Cook Islands.

The Punanga Tauturu Inc, a women's counselling centre, and the Gender and Development Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs signed an MOU establishing the service on 25 January.

Supported by the Australian Government through the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (Pacific Women) program, the service will provide initial legal advice and representation for women in domestic violence cases.



Punanga Tauturu Women's Counselling Centre coordinator, board members and patron. (From left Kairangi Samuela, Ana Metuarau, Rebeka Buchanan, Vaine Arioka and Helen Greig. Photo credit: Pacific Women Support Unit (Hilary Gorman)

Centre Coordinator Rebeka Buchanan said legal aid is a lifeline for vulnerable women.

“It helps women to have a lawyer to address their domestic violence issues without being further subjected to abuse and harassment at home, in public or at work,” Ms Buchanan said.

“It is a woman’s right to address these issues and seek justice for herself and children when they become victims of domestic violence.”

The 2014 Cook Islands Family Health and Safety Study reported that nearly one in three women who had ever had a partner (32.2%) had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives.

Ruta Pokura, the Senior Advisor with the Gender and Development Office, Ministry of Internal Affairs, said domestic violence against women is considerably underreported.

“This could be because of threats of removal of their children, or an inability to pay for legal access through the court system in order to realise their rights, safety or access civil remedies,” Ms Pokura said.

“The legal aid service aims to promote access to justice through early intervention strategy, prevention and better target of legal assistance for women and their children. Survivors of domestic violence will be assisted to understand their rights and options at their earliest possible opportunity.”

Ms Buchanan said legal aid is for all women living in the Cook Islands, in the event they are subjected to constant abuse by their ex or current partner, or husband.