

Coalition power central to COVID-19 response

By Sheldon Chanel for *Pacific Women*.

Webpage: <https://pacificwomen.org/news/coalition-power-central-to-covid-19-response/>

'All of us working on women's rights issues know why we do this work – it's because there is a problem we are trying to address,' said Nalini Singh, Executive Director of Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM).

Ms Singh was representing the We Rise Coalition, of which FWRM is a member, at a recent workshop in Suva.

We Rise Coalition is a Pacific feminist coalition, part of the broader Pacific women's movement. The coalition has worked relentlessly for gender equality, including during the current COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery period.

Existing gender inequalities are exacerbated during a crisis such as COVID-19, resulting in women and girls facing even higher rates of sexual and gender-based violence coupled with a greatly increased unpaid care work burden and less access to health services.

Solidarity and inclusivity, and the power of coalitions, have been central to efforts among women's groups advocating for gender-inclusive responses to the pandemic.

These efforts are just the latest in a series of initiatives by the We Rise Coalition, which was established in 2015 by four feminist organisations, and supported by *Pacific Women*. This marked the second phase of We Rise, building on a partnership between FWRM and International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) from 2012–2015.

Bound by a Memorandum of Understanding and now in its third phase, ongoing members are the FWRM, femLINKpacific (femLINK) and IWDA, now joined by four new partners. The coalition welcomed Talitha Project in Tonga, Brown Girl Woke in Samoa, Sista in Vanuatu, and Voice for Change in Papua New Guinea in a [We Rise announcement](#) during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.

As a coalition, We Rise seeks to address gender justice, ecological sustainability, peace, freedom, equality and human rights for all. They also aim to collectively increase their community impact and reach.

Recognising the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, the Coalition partners are targeting programs to address the inequality exacerbated by the pandemic.

As a result of its focus on increasing its reach, the coalition has directly engaged with 7,125 people from 13 Pacific Island countries at the community level through its coalition building, feminist analysis and practice activities from 2015 to 2019.¹ These individuals and groups are able to harness combined resources and networks to influence decision making at local, national and regional levels.

This includes taking women's human rights issues to high-level intergovernmental meetings, such as annual United Nations Commissions on the Status of Women (CSWs). This ensures women and other marginalised groups have their voices heard at some of the highest tables in the world, with stronger prospects for funding support and remedial actions.

Another major aim of the coalition is to create spaces for meaningful dialogue between feminist and human rights organisations to foster collective action, such as hosting the Pacific Feminist Forum.

The inaugural three-day forum was hosted in Suva, Fiji, in November 2016, organised by feminists, women human rights defenders and gender equality advocates from around the region. A key outcome

¹ We Rise Coalition: We Rise 2 Program Completion Report (October 2019).

was the launch of the Pacific Feminist Charter, a pioneering document that highlighted common challenges and outlined regional priorities. The forum was held for a second time in 2019 in Fiji, providing space for Pacific feminists from across the region to again reflect on and address emerging issues.

The coalition also supported the Fiji Women's Forum and the Fiji Young Women's Forum, through FWRM, which culminated in a three-day intergenerational National Women's Convention on advancing gender equality and women's political participation in August 2017. These efforts have strengthened women's organising in Fiji and contributed to growing the women's movement in the country.

The impact of the We Rise Coalition has been particularly evident in the COVID-19 response, including at the national level in Fiji where the pandemic is contributing to economic hardship, including [thousands of job losses](#).

'The way in which this virus was transmitting and how countries abroad were shutting their borders, we knew that we in Fiji were going to be hit hard,' said Ms Singh.

'And when any shock comes, whether with disasters or a pandemic, we know we [women] are going to be impacted again.'

We Rise Coalition members, femLINK and FWRM, drew on their experiences from the Tropical Cyclone Winston response and recovery to move quickly towards a combined cooperative approach with other civil society organisations to best serve diverse women, girls and marginalised groups.

The coalition is also advocating for inclusive social protection measures, such as welfare payments and government investment schemes. According to IWDA, 61.1% of people across the Asia-Pacific region are not covered by any social protections.²

The coalition also engaged groups, such as femLINK's Rural Women Leaders Community Media Network, to document the impacts of COVID-19 and develop an evidence base to inform advocacy and recovery efforts. Together with FWRM's contributions to identify the [gendered impacts of COVID-19](#), including on [young women and girls](#), there was a solid basis for the coalition's lobbying for social protections.

'A number of us said "before government announces what their response is, we must get to them with evidence around how women are going to be affected",' Ms Singh said.

COVID-19 has brought immense challenges to the region, particularly for feminist organising and collaboration. However, the coalition has drawn on their shared values to strengthen collaboration in the face of these challenges. These values are: transparency and accountability, self-care, sustainability, solidarity, equality and diversity.

'We join our strengths, resources and networks together towards a common vision,' [say coalition members](#).

The coalition cooperates in joint actions; joining the strengths, resources and networks of each partner in demanding that women are able to realize their full human rights, equality and justice, and creating a political force for change that cannot be ignored by families, communities, governments, or society at large.

We Rise Coalition is funded by Australia through Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*).

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² IWDA: Factsheet: Social Protections During COVID-19. <https://iwda.org.au/resource/factsheet-social-protections-during-covid-19/>