

# What does an economically empowered Pacific woman look like?

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‘Economics assumes women and men make decisions in the same way and that they react to economic stimuli in the same way, but they don’t.

‘We need to include women’s experiences in developing policies and creating laws,’ Dr Nagarajan, Professor of Law at Macquarie University said, setting the scene on the first day of the Pacific Women Regional Learning Forum on Women’s Economic Empowerment.

More than 240 Pacific Islanders, researchers, policy makers and development practitioners from nine countries gathered to share ideas and lessons learned. They contributed to the knowledge base about Pacific women earning an income, accumulating economic assets and making decisions about their finances. The event, held at the University of South Pacific’s Laucala campus in Fiji in May 2019, recognised the efforts to improve women’s economic empowerment and promoted Pacific and global research and good practice on the subject.

‘Go to the community and ask them what they can do,’ encouraged Litia Naitanui, Rewa Branch President of Fiji Disabled Peoples Federation, adding: ‘Use the capacity and potential that we have.’

The practice of ‘nothing about us, without us’ promotes inclusive development that responds to the needs of the beneficiaries. This was a key take-away at the forum for policy makers and program implementers about the importance of including women from diverse groups when developing the policies or projects intended to support them.

Several panellists at the Forum mentioned how crucial it is not to address women’s economic empowerment as a stand-alone issue. It must be

integrated across education, health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, livelihoods, economic development and other programs.

There was considerable discussion around the difference between economic advancement and economic empowerment – for women to not just earn an income but to have decision making control around how that money is spent. For women’s income generation to be meaningful and sustainable, programs must take into account women’s various family and professional roles, the diversity of women and the opportunities that exist for them.

‘One learning from working primarily with women is that they play so many roles with family, community and church that it is not possible to involve them in economic activities without involving the family,’ said Adimaimalaga Tafuna’i, co-founder of Women in Business Development Inc.

‘Support at all levels is key,’ Ms Tafuna’i shared, reflecting on her approach of more than 24 years working successfully to support women’s entrepreneurship in Samoa. Women in Business Development Inc’s achievements include a partnership to provide virgin coconut oil to global cosmetics company, The Body Shop.



Miel Sequeira-Holm at the Regional Learning Forum on Women’s Economic Empowerment. Photo credit: Pacific Women Support Unit/Fotofusion.

Technology, too, is playing a role in breaking down those structures that have historically precluded women from engaging in economic activities. Young women – like Miel Sequeira-Holm, who researched sunscreens online and

now sells her reef-safe sunscreen over the internet from Palau – are taking advantage of global markets that are opening up with increasing access to the internet.

The Forum generated a large number of ideas for research, articulated concepts to be progressed through new and improved policies and identified practices that are working well and could be scaled up.

Evaluations of the Forum indicated 85 per cent of participants felt better able to perform their responsibilities as a result of participating in the event. The Forum achieved its objectives, providing the opportunity for women to communicate their experiences on three key topics: social norms and women's economic empowerment; ensuring women's economic empowerment interventions and research are inclusive of all women; and changes in enabling environments and institutions to support genuine women's economic empowerment.