

# From the ground up: Women's groups create new crisis services

Federated States Of Micronesia | Kiribati | Regional | Republic Of The Marshall Islands | Ending Violence Against Women

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By Louisa Gibbs and Sian Rolls, Pacific Women.

Dedicated women's groups in small island states are leading the creation of safe spaces and the provision of quality services for women and children experiencing violence.

Three countries now have their first crisis centres for women and children survivors, established by Pacific Women partners. Along with funding for these organisations, the Pacific Women Support Unit has been providing technical assistance throughout the journey.



Kiribati Women and Children Support Centre Coordinator Teretia Tokam with Tiero Tetabea from Kiribati Family Health Association. Photo credit: Pacific Women Support Unit / Tara Chetty.

Funded by the Australian Government through Pacific Women, the Kiribati Women and Children Support Centre (KWCS) became independent in July 2019. This was a major milestone, following 18 months operating under the auspices of the Kiribati Family Health Association. The Support Unit, UN Women and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre provided technical support and training to help KWCS during its early years of operation and to establish its services.

'I really want to support these women to let them know they have more opportunities, and they have choices, and they have support with the centre,' explained Teretia Tokam, KWCS coordinator. 'Before there was no such support and I am very grateful that now, through the centre, women and children can access some help.'

KWCS provides free, confidential counselling, legal information, case management and community awareness services, with staff serving 156 new clients during 2019. It also works to address domestic violence at the community level. KWCS is working closely with the Kiribati Family Health Association and Teinainano Urban Council to draft a gender-based violence by-law to declare Maneaba as an emergency safe place for survivors of gender-based violence and child abuse. This proposed by-law is being discussed with Kiribati's nine island councils.

'Our culture is about protection and shared roles and responsibilities, about men and women working together and respecting each other,' emphasised Ms Tokam. When finalised, the by-laws will provide formal legal recognition of rules made to address community concerns on domestic violence.

Ms Tokam is already sharing the experience of KWCS with other emerging service providers, including through a support visit to the region's newest crisis service in Chuuk State. The soft launch of the Tongen Inepwinew Counseling Center in December 2019 heralded the first crisis support centre for survivors of violence against women in the Federated States of Micronesia. Christina 'Kiki' Stinnett is the President of the Chuuk Women's Council, which operates the centre.

'A woman said [to me] and I quote, "Why now! You should have provided this service [a] long time ago. This is good that we have this in Chuuk now as we need this!" I agree with this woman. If we don't do it now, then when and who will do it?' said Ms Stinnett.



Chuuk Women's Council (CWC) staff with Honourable Dr Sharman Stone, Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls during the soft launch of the Tongen Inepwinew Counseling Center in December 2019. Photo credit: CWC.

The centre provides free, confidential and non-judgmental counselling for survivors of domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment and child sexual abuse.

'The Tongen Inepwinew Counseling Center envisions a Chuuk State that is free from all forms of violence and discrimination against women,' said Ms Stinnett. 'All its activities are survivor or women centred, which means we do not blame the women for the domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment that she has experienced or is experiencing. It is never the woman's fault.'

In the Republic of the Marshall Islands, local non-government organisation Women United in the Marshall Islands (WUTMI) has been operating the country's first counselling service, Weto in Mour since 2016 with support from Pacific Women. WUTMI's experience has been that establishing a centre is just a start; the next step is creating awareness in communities on the issue of violence against women and facilitating access for women who need services. Weto in Mour has increased awareness of the issue of violence against women and improved the services and referral network available to survivors.

But there are many challenges, not least of which is working on a sensitive issue within a small population, particularly in the outer islands. ‘Here on Majuro [the capital city] we say that we are related to everyone,’ explained Candida Kaious, Weto in Mour’s Program Coordinator. ‘But, in the outer islands, they are really close, like, “this is my house, this is my brother’s house, that’s my sister’s house” and there is no person that is not related to the other.’

Tania Terry provides psychosocial support for Weto in Mour’s clients via case management and case advocacy work. She shared an example of a client in a remote area whom she supported for more than a year and a half to obtain a temporary protection order. ‘The perpetrator was a [local police] officer,’ she explained, so the survivor had to wait a couple of months for a national police officer to come to the island to assist. Even then, challenges continued. ‘The community judge [and] the clerk were not aware of the domestic violence law. They did not know ... the process of the temporary protection order,’ Ms Terry said.



Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI) staff. Standing, left to right: Tomiko Maddison and Christy Mckay. Seated, left to right: Tanya Terry and Daniya Note. Photo credit: WUTMI.

In 2019, Weto in Mour provided services to 25 new clients. They assisted two clients with emergency accommodation and seven women to apply for and receive protection orders through the court. These numbers may seem small, but must be understood in the context of a population of less than 60,000 people, where women do not speak out against violence and support services for women are very new.

These three centres are built on pre-existing community structures and Pacific Women is convening opportunities for them to learn from each other to offer contextually relevant crisis services to clients. Through these partnerships, KSCWC, Weto in Mour and Tongen Inepwinew Counseling Center are sharing learning and providing critical leadership in ending violence against women in the region.

The staff believe that they can only change the community if they are passionate about the work they do and inspire others.

‘Just seeing these women being empowered and free,’ said Weto in Mour’s Ms Kaious, ‘there’s a wonderful feeling there. We feel proud of ourself. And the women [clients] as well.’

This story has been developed for the Pacific Women Annual Progress Report 2019. It features Pacific Women-funded initiatives and partners. For more information about Pacific Women’s support for initiatives across the region, refer to the interactive map: <https://pacificwomen.org/map/>