

The Pacific's first free legal centre for survivors of domestic violence

Regional Tonga Ending Violence Against Women

December 18, 2019

*This Story of Change was originally published in the [Pacific Women Annual Progress Report 2017–2018](#). All values are consistent with that reporting period.

Project name: Support to the Pacific Community Regional Rights Resource Team (Regional)

Project partner: Pacific Community's Regional Rights Resource Team

Total funding: \$5,750,000**

Funding timeframe: 2015–2020

Tonga is the first country in the region to have a dedicated legal centre providing free assistance for survivors of domestic violence. In its first three months of operation, the Family Protection Legal Aid Centre in Nuku'alofa served 139 clients.

The Tongan Family Protection Act 2014 provides the legal framework for the protection of survivors of domestic violence. Challenges implementing the Act have been the lack of accessible legal advice for survivors of domestic violence and limited awareness of women's legal protections under the Act. The new legal centre, opened in March 2018, seeks to address these barriers to accessing justice.

Pacific Women funded the Pacific Community's Regional Rights Resource Team to work with the Tongan Ministry of Justice to design and operationalise the legal centre. 'The purpose of this project is to complement and work with agencies already providing services to survivors of domestic violence,' said Nicol Cave, former Interim Director of the Regional Rights Resource Team. '[The Regional Rights Resource Team] recognises the important work being

done by other partners and will work collaboratively to ensure that the work is not duplicated, but rather integrated to assist the government in meeting all its obligations under the Family Protection Act.’ The Regional Rights Resource Team trained and mentored staff, developed data collection and monitoring systems, supported the Steering Committee and assisted to develop centre procedures.



Legal aid centre staff in front of the new centre. Photo credit: Australian High Commission, Tonga.

The legal centre is now staffed by a team of one lawyer and four legal advocates who provide information and representation for cases of domestic violence and related family law issues. This has included support for 53 women to apply for protection orders between March–June 2018. To date, 34 of these applications have been granted and eight have been declined.*** Legal centre staff also provide telephone assistance to women who live outside the capital, Nuku’alofa. Plans are underway for staff to travel to the outer islands (Vava’u, Ha’apai and ‘Eua) with the regular court circuit to provide assistance in person.

Plans for a free legal centre arose from broad consultations about the Family Protection Act 2014 conducted during 2016. The plan gained broad support, with advocates including the late Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Justice and the Women and Children Crisis Centre.

At the Steering Committee in May 2018, the Ministry of Justice indicated a willingness to support the centre beyond its one-year pilot.

**This funding is from the regional program and complements support from the Governments of Tonga and Sweden.

***Statistics are correct on 26 June 2018. As of that date, of the remaining 11 applications, five were pending, three had been withdrawn and three were classified as 'other'.