

# Putting the ‘empowerment’ back into ‘women’s economic empowerment’

Papua New Guinea Regional Vanuatu Economic Empowerment

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The WEE snakes and ladders game developed by Pacific Women helps educate players about the importance of economic empowerment versus economic participation. Image credit: Pacific Women / Tui Ledua

The word ‘empowerment’ is often used as a stand-in for ‘economic participation’ in income generating activities. While economic participation has the potential to greatly enhance women’s quality of life, sometimes it also has negative effects such as increased workloads for women now balancing paid work in addition to unpaid household work. For economic development initiatives to meaningfully address the empowerment element of women’s economic empowerment (WEE), it is critical to address gendered power dynamics. Women not only need to earn more than they do but they need to also be empowered to make decisions about themselves and their income.

Pacific Women partners in Papua New Guinea – using family-based approaches – are demonstrating how working with women and men in their family units can improve economic outcomes and bring a better balance to decision making in homes.

Families in CARE's Coffee Industry Support Project (CARE Coffee) have achieved a 22 per cent increase in income from their coffee production, while participants in the University of Canberra's Family Farm Teams project reported eight-fold increases in income.

As well as these financial boosts, the projects have resulted in a more equal division of farming and household workloads for women and men in families. These family-based approaches build families' economic security, business management and crop farming skills. At the same time, participants develop a new appreciation of women's workloads and the value of shared work. This strategy aims to increase equality between women and men by gradually shifting gender roles to be more equal.

The result is greater, fairer sharing of workloads and financial decision making in families, for both women and men.

The proportion of households where women and men perform labour and household tasks equally increased by 11 per cent over three years for those households in which the women received training through the CARE Coffee project. Family Farm Teams families were observed to work as a team with greater unity around a shared goal and there was evidence of women having more control over family income and assets.

'We know that strong cultural and economic norms around women's and men's roles often disadvantage women in their homes, in their communities, and also at work,' shared Elsie Mongoru, Program Manager for the CARE Coffee project. 'That's why we work with corporations, individuals, as well as families to change perceptions, behaviours and practices. It is important to work with both women and men on changing social norms in households,' she said.

Another Pacific Women partner, Vanuatu Skills Partnership, has developed a Better Balance Strategy' to ensure that its technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programming challenges gender stereotypes and offers fairer opportunities for women and men. This involves understanding the different expectations that families and communities place on women versus men.

'We work to make visible the role women contribute in household livelihoods. We encourage men to take up a fair share of the responsibilities in their

homes and to support the participation of their wives in decision making,' explained Fremden Shadrack, Director of the Vanuatu Skills Partnership.



Pacific Women Support Unit's snakes and ladders boardgame enables players to address challenges (snakes) and enablers (ladders) on the journey towards women's economic empowerment. Image credit: Pacific Women / Tui Ledia

Ms Mongoru and Mr Shadrack shared lessons from their projects in their presentation From participation to power: mapping economic pathways to women's empowerment at a side event convened by Pacific Women during the 14th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women in April. More than 650 participants registered to participate in the session, which also included an interactive snakes and ladders activity that illustrated some of the multiple challenges (snakes) and enablers (ladders) on the journey towards women's economic empowerment.

Over eight years of programming, Pacific Women has promoted the importance of using forums like this one to share lessons about a Pacific understanding of women's economic empowerment.<sup>1</sup>

The relevance and applicability of strategies and approaches to women's economic empowerment that originate outside of the region is limited given the unique geography, economies and cultures of Pacific Island countries. Understanding and sharing Pacific approaches to women's economic empowerment are, therefore, doubly important to inform successful economic development and gender equality initiatives.

To support this, Pacific Women convened the first ever Regional Learning Forum on Women's Economic Empowerment in 2019. More than 240 Pacific Islands 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.

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. Ideas for supporting the "E" in WEE ranged from the work with families through to the changes needed at an institutional level.

'Economics assumes women and men make decisions in the same way and that they react to economic stimuli in the same way,' explained Dr Vijaya Nagarajan, Professor of Law at Macquarie University in her keynote address at the forum. 'But they don't. We need to include women's experiences in developing policies and creating laws,' she said.

And transformation is starting to happen. Just ask Ms Mongoru, who said, 'Our programs prove that practices that discriminate and disadvantage women can change.'