

Women market vendors making executive decisions

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For decisions to reflect the needs and experiences of women, women need to be part of the decision-making process.

Across the Pacific, women comprise 75–90 per cent of market vendors. Yet decisions about markets have historically been made by market management and municipal councils dominated by men. However, market vendor associations are now changing that status quo.

Over the past eight years, women’s voices have increasingly been heard in the management and design of marketplaces, through support from the Markets for Change project in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; and the Port Moresby: A Safe City for Women and Girls (Safe City) and Safe and Prosperous Districts projects in Papua New Guinea.

‘The focus of the Markets for Change project is to look at the barriers that women face, and to work towards removing them,’ explained Sandra Bernklau, Representative for the UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office at the Pacific Women Regional Learning Forum on Women’s Economic Empowerment in 2019. ‘When women form associations, they develop collective power. A single market vendor has limited power, but forming an association gives the group voice and power to lobby and influence government decisions.’

By influencing market infrastructure, these market vendor associations have supported improvements for women in the design, security, access to amenities and sleeping arrangements at their workplaces.

In Vanuatu, market vendor association representatives have been part of the project steering committee for the government’s Port Vila Central Market Hygiene, Sanitation and Amenity Facilities Improvement Project. UN Women lobbied for the vendors’ membership on the committee and guided them to ensure that government infrastructure plans involved the vendors.

‘The Port Vila Central Market House represents a way of life for the vendors,’ said Rachel Merang Silae, President of the Silae Vanua Market Vendors Association. ‘We are all looking forward to the improved facilities, which will benefit everyone and be much appreciated.’

Port Vila Market now has new toilet blocks and a wastewater treatment plant, new washing facilities for vendors, an area with more covered seating and an office block for the Port Vila Central Market administration and Silae Vanua Market Vendor Association.



Women market vendors at the ground breaking ceremony for the new Gizo marketplace, Solomon Islands. Photo source: UN Women / Andrew Plant

In Solomon Islands, the Western Provincial Government involved market vendor association representatives in planning a new marketplace in the provincial capital, Gizo.

‘The organising of vendors is critical as it helps to promote women’s voices to ensure they benefit from the economic opportunities arising from the market’s reconstruction; and from a clean, safe and healthy working environment,’ explained UN Women’s Solomon Islands Country Programme Coordinator, Alvina Erekali.

The Western Provincial Government also allocated 20 per cent of its budget to women's development work. The benefits are being publicly recognised:

'The completion of the Gizo market building will contribute immensely to tourism and economic activities in the province, benefiting market vendors, most of whom are women, and the rural population in general,' said the Honourable Premier of Western Province Wyne Maepio at the ground breaking ceremony for the new Gizo marketplace.

In Papua New Guinea, taking the bus to work or to shop at the market, selling goods in the marketplace and walking down the street can be places where sexual harassment and gender-based violence occur. After receiving training from UN Women, women market vendors audited markets and bus stations and provided their findings to market authorities.

At the Safe City project's first site – Gerehu Market – the project supported the renovation of market stalls, provided clean drinking water, improved sanitation and the design of toilets and built a playground for the young children who accompany many women vendors. Lighting was improved and fences that isolated areas of the market were torn down. New police posts were created and police, market controllers and security guards were trained on preventing and responding to violence against women.

The Department of Community Development and Religion has also adopted the market vendor association model developed through the Safe City project as the 'voice strategy' in its draft Informal Economy Strategy. The voice strategy provides a practical and formal means for those in the informal economy to engage with national policy and decision makers about issues affecting their business.

In Fiji, the skills and camaraderie that women vendors have developed through being part of Markets for Change activities has seen them take a leadership role to ensure the safety of their fellow vendors when disaster strikes.

Tropical Cyclone Josie caused severe flooding in the Ba Municipal Market in April 2018. The market flooded overnight with mud and silt damaging market infrastructure, and affecting the livelihoods of more than 300 vendors.

In response, market vendors at Nausori Market started a collection drive. They gathered enough contributions to create 150 ration packs with food and clothing for the market vendors and their families in Ba.

‘The pain and hurt that hit the vendors in Ba Market touched our hearts,’ shared Venina Vakarusere, President of the Nausori Market Vendors Association. ‘The unity in our market moved us to quickly sit down and have a talk about it, and then go to the Market Master. All the markets in Fiji are like one family because we all know each other now, so we should look out for each other.’

Women continue to move into more leadership roles, transforming decision making into a more inclusive process that benefits all members of society equally.



The Rakiraki Market official opening last year was supported by Markets for Change. Photo credit: UN Women