

Safe working conditions make markets a happy, healthy place

Fiji Papua New Guinea Regional Solomon Islands Vanuatu
Economic Empowerment

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Between 75–90 per cent of all market vendors in the Pacific region are women. The hours are long, and vendors often travel from rural areas to sell their products to a larger market. Markets provide significant opportunities for women and men to participate in the country's economic growth. However, vendors work informally and, historically, this has meant limited regulation and few protections to ensure safe working conditions.



Jamie Wartovo, Sanap Wantaim male youth advocate, and Jacinta Kasozi, international United Nations volunteer, engaging in discussion with a market vendor in Papua New Guinea. Photo credit: UN Women

UN Women is working in four countries to ensure markets are safer workplaces for their vendors. The Markets for Change project covers Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; while the Port Moresby: A Safe City for Women and Girls and Safe and Prosperous Districts: Linking Communities to Markets for Secure Livelihoods projects work in Papua New Guinea. These programs and projects are supporting markets to develop and implement policies that make them safe and inclusive for those who work there.

These projects have shown that to make marketplaces safer for women vendors, it is necessary to undertake interventions aimed at updating local and municipal government systems and regulations. The program supports local government agencies to set up inclusive market management and operations systems. It works with market vendor associations to increase their knowledge and skills to engage actively with market management; and to advocate for their rights and interests for safe markets to improve their businesses.

The projects improve safety for vendors by developing physical infrastructure that is safer and accessible, ensuring women vendors inform designs. This means they include considerations important to women: improved hygiene, sanitation, disability access, amenity facilities and safe accommodation for vendors who travel from far away to sell in the markets.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in concerns for health and safety and socio-economic impact.

UN Women's rapid assessments revealed that the closure of markets and public transport and movement restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in reductions of more than 82 per cent in household income levels for informal economy workers, most of whom are women. Market vendors reported over 51 per cent reduction in daily market earnings.

In Papua New Guinea, as a result of UN Women's advocacy on the importance of food security and family livelihoods, markets in Port Moresby remained open and operational throughout the initial state of emergency lockdown. UN Women developed guidelines for local authorities with a set of minimum standards and operational actions to keep markets clean and prevent the spread of COVID-19. The State of Emergency Controller issued these guidelines to apply nationally in June 2020.

'I think small changes can make a big difference,' said Rose Starlyn, a Solomon Islands market vendor. 'We can make a market that is a happy place for everyone, that is healthy for everyone, where more people can come, and market vendors can earn more money.'