

# Dialling up services in response to COVID-19

Federated States Of Micronesia|Kiribati|Nauru|Papua New Guinea|Regional|Republic Of The Marshall Islands|Solomon Islands|Tonga|Vanuatu|Ending Violence Against Women

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During lockdowns, curfews, states of emergency; the incidence of violence against women increases but women's ability to visit crisis centre counsellors is restricted.

Existing gender inequalities are magnified during a crisis, with women having considerably less autonomy and mobility leading to increases in men's violence against women. To combat this serious challenge created by the COVID-19 pandemic, Pacific Women supported newer crisis centres in the North Pacific to move quickly and adapt their models of service provision to include telephone counselling.



Women United Together Marshall Islands operates the Weto in Mour counselling and support service for women survivors of violence, with staff including Cindy Wase. Photo credit: Pacific Women / Chewy Lin

Chuuk Women's Council's Tongen Inepwineu Counseling Center (TICC) in the Federated States of Micronesia and Women United Together Marshall Islands' (WUTMI) Weto in Mour are the only crisis support centres for survivors of violence against women and children in their countries. It is essential these services continue to provide counselling to existing and new clients during a time of heightened risk.

The Pacific Women Support Unit developed specialised telephone counselling training and worked with counsellors to upskill them in telephone counselling. The six-part training series combined expert technical advice from Pacific Women's gender-based violence and counselling advisers with opportunities from the TICC and Weto in Mour counsellors to learn from each other and participate in role plays.

'Not only have I had the pleasure of meeting new partners and beautiful women from other neighbouring islands via Zoom but, more importantly, [I am] able to pick their brain and learn about their ways of counselling and areas I can improve on,' said Daniya Note, counsellor and caseworker with Weto in Mour.

Weto in Mour's program coordinator, Candida Kaious, said 'understanding the differences between phone and face-to-face counselling' makes her excited. 'Now we, as counsellors, know and understand why it is different.'

It was an early pivot to service provision for Chuuk Women's Council, which only opened the doors to TICC in March 2020, just before the pandemic hit. 'Basically, everything is new to us,' explained Marivic Preciado, TICC Assistant Counsellor/Caseworker, who embraced the opportunity to learn. 'The only challenge we face is the technical issues. I feel excited about learning more,' she said.

Staff at TICC also worked with the Pacific Women Support Unit to develop the COVID-19 Staying Safe at Home video animation. It promoted telephone, online and walk-in counselling and referral services. This animation was translated into Chuukese and distributed by the Chuuk Women's Council. Similar animations were also produced for Nauru, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu.

Pacific Women supported UN Women and partners to produce an online series featuring crisis centres' telephone hotlines and counselling contacts on social media, in eight countries at the start of the pandemic.

More established crisis centres in Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu already had experience in telephone counselling. Seeing an opportunity for peer learning and additional support during the pandemic, the Family Support Centre, Tonga National Centre for Women and Children, Tonga Women and Children Crisis Centre and Vanuatu Women's Centre joined in an online telephone counselling exchange.

'We were excited to be able to draw on such a wealth of experience that these crisis centres already had in delivering telephone counselling services,' said co-facilitator Hannah Jay, Pacific Women's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Adviser to Tonga and Nauru. 'They have been really proactive in setting up telephone counselling services in advance and in response to this COVID-19 pandemic.'

Counsellor and caseworker participants agreed the skills needed for phone counselling are different from face-to-face counselling. The learning exchange sessions enabled them to further develop those unique skills for their organisations' COVID-19 response.

The exchange was timely, with the first COVID-19 cases in Vanuatu announced during the first days of the exchange. In fact, demand for services at the Vanuatu Women's Centre was very high. From July–November 2020, the centre provided 3,665 counselling sessions for 1,022 new clients; and 2,643 sessions for repeat clients. A key contribution to the rise in clients in the second half of 2020 was the centre's new toll-free telephone hotline.

Like other crisis centres in the Pacific, the Kiribati Women and Children Support Centre is increasingly active.

UN Women's COVID-19 Protection Project partnered with ChildFund to expand access to telephone counselling in Papua New Guinea. From November 2020, the 1-Tok Kaunselin helpim lain became available 24 hours, seven days a week. By January 2021, the helpline counsellors had supported 433 survivors of violence and provided information on gender-based violence to even more callers.

Pacific Women partners were also actively involved in advocacy that resulted in crisis centres being classified as essential services during COVID-19. This enabled them to keep their doors open. In Papua New Guinea, staff were prioritised as frontline workers for COVID-19 vaccination prioritisation.

Telephone counselling is ensuring that contextually relevant services are available for women who experience violence, and ensuring they are able to access the support they need. The benefits extend beyond crises. In the context of island states, telephone counselling is making services more available to women living in rural and remote areas.

Pacific Women's 2017 review of counselling services in the Pacific identified just 19 organisations in the region offering telephone counselling services at the time. This extension in the quality and availability of telephone counselling services is ensuring more women can report and receive support when they experience violence.

'Because of this training, I am more confident about going into telephone counselling,' said TICC's Ms Preciado.



A counsellor and caseworker during a session at the Tongen Inepwineu Counseling Center (TICC), operated by Chuuk Women's Council. Photo credit: Pacific Women / James Benito