

Believing in themselves, Pacific girls are leading change

Fiji Papua New Guinea Regional Tonga

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Girls that attended the Pacific Girl Inception Workshop with Fiji's Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation at the Pacific Girl Speak Out. Photo credit: *Pacific Women Support Unit*.

Being a girl rocks! Girls from four countries came together to drive positive change for adolescent girls across the region at the Pacific Girl Inception Workshop. The girls spoke of the importance of voice, creating safe spaces and being valued within families, schools and communities.

Harnessing their talents, using leadership, sports, music and arts, Pacific Girl is focused on what girls want and the issues they face. Issues of sexual and reproductive health, freedom from violence, bullying and abuse, access to education and dreaming big, without harmful constraints of discrimination and gender roles.

Pacific Girl is a \$4.5 million multi-country program to support adolescent girls in Pacific Island countries achieve their full potential, funded and managed by the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program. Ensuring programming discussions and decisions upheld the principle of ‘nothing about us, without us’ remained the priority for the girls from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu who were among the 70 participants at the Pacific Girl Inception Workshop, held in Suva, Fiji, from 21–25 October 2019.

‘Last year, in May ... the girls met for the first time, shared issues, cultural values and identified solutions simultaneously and, most important of all, became sisters,’ shared Adi Ana Cirikiwai, 18 from Fiji, during the workshop’s Pacific Girl Speak Out event.

The workshop in brought together these adolescent representatives, civil society organisations and the wider development community. The group planned future Pacific Girl activities, gained a better understanding of Pacific Girl projects in each of the program’s six focus countries and developed tools and processes to track progress. Adolescent girls prepared for the workshop by holding their own, closed forum called *Girls Pawa Toktok*.



Left: Camilla Hansen; Right: Adi Ana Cirikiwai. Photo credit: *Pacific Women Support Unit*.

The Pacific Girl Speak Out gave a platform for girls from Fiji, Vanuatu, Tonga and Papua New Guinea to highlight issues that affect them and network with other program stakeholders.

Camilla Hansen, 19, a representative of the Talitha Project and the Tonga Leitis Association shared a message of hope, strength and resilience about and for her peers:

‘I would like to talk about us women, young women. I know we are the seeds of today. Today, we’ve got to make a tomorrow. I know it ain’t easy for us because we face so much barriers and obstruction on the way. For example, I might say the religion, the culture. Don’t blame that... Walk with your head high and walk on, walk strong. It takes time for the progress to go on, but it’s for us to make a decision.’



Girls performing the Pacific Girl Song. Photo credit: *Pacific Women Support Unit.*

Anamalia Falemaka, 16, from Tonga noted how music was a powerful way for girls to express themselves. She introduced a song, written by girls participating in the program last year. It highlights challenges for Pacific girls, such as teen pregnancy and cyberbullying, and encourages girls to believe in themselves to overcome them. ‘I have the girls with me here,’ she said, ‘and we hope you enjoy the song. This song pretty much just is our voices from the times we are afraid to speak and we like to sing our voices.’

You can listen to a recording of the song here: <https://pacificwomen.org/resources/pacific-girl-song/>

Fiji’s Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, the Honourable Minister Mereseini Vuniwaqa, addressing the Pacific Girl Speak Out event described the Pacific Girl program as ‘an outstanding initiative at the right time to reinforce Pacific girls’ rights’.



Fiji's Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, the Honourable Minister Mereseini Vuniwaqa. Photo credit: *Pacific Women Support Unit*.

'Let's acknowledge that while progress since the Beijing Declaration is remarkable, girls in the Pacific are still constrained by social norms, including harmful practices like child marriage, deeply rooted gender roles, a widespread burden of unpaid care and domestic work, unequal power and voice and outright discrimination.'

But more and more girls are moving from 'dreaming to achieving,' Minister Vuniwaqa noted. 'Girls are breaking boundaries and barriers posed by stereotypes and exclusion. As leaders, activists, innovators and initiators of movements, Pacific girls are creating a world that is relevant for them and future generations.'