

How COVID-19 is affecting women's economic empowerment in the Pacific – and what we can do about it

Fiji Papua New Guinea Regional Tuvalu

SHARE

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Even in Pacific Island countries where there have been few or no cases of COVID-19, the pandemic is having a disproportionate, negative impact on women's economic activities and their control over the income they earn.

But can the challenges being faced be converted into an opportunity to re-define economic systems to assist women to equitably participate in, and benefit from, national economies?

Panelists from Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tuvalu discussed this idea at *Pacific Women's* first webinar on Women's Economic Empowerment and COVID-19 in the Pacific, on 22 July 2020. They explored the impact of COVID-19 on women's livelihoods and efforts to assist women, particularly those working in the informal economy.

Despite there being no positive cases of COVID-19 recorded in Tuvalu, Asita Molotii, Director of the Tuvalu Gender Affairs Department, explained that COVID-19's impact on global trade raised many concerns, such as about boats not being able to deliver food to the capital city, Funafuti.

'The government took precautionary measures, encouraging people to move to the outer islands for food security,' she said.

Ms Molotii's department conducted a rapid assessment of the effect of COVID-19 on Tuvaluan women. They found 81 per cent of women interviewed were experiencing a greater burden from care work, with increased duties caring for elderly family members and children not attending

school. With this higher burden of care, women no longer have spare time to engage in money making activities, typically producing handicrafts.

‘The Tuvaluan Government gave a cash grant of \$40 per person and \$500,000 to each island for grants to make sure they are responding to the needs of the population, including those who have no houses due to relocation,’ she said. ‘The Government is looking at how to assist women producing handicrafts.’

‘We find dependency on imported food makes people more vulnerable in the Pacific,’ added Brigitte Leduc, *Pacific Women’s* Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Adviser for Tuvalu who works closely with Ms Molotii.

‘A highlight from the rapid assessment was that people highlighted that strong communities helped people to cope better [with COVID-19]. They supported each other, sharing tools, housing, water tanks. It was a way to reconnect with children on traditional ways of food security,’ Ms Leduc added.

Read more about the findings in the assessment [summary](#) and [leaflet](#).

Maureen Penjueli, Coordinator of the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG), commented that: ‘In Fiji, the tourism industry employs 118,500 people, a quarter of Fiji’s entire population with a high proportion of women in those jobs.’

As a panelist, Ms Penjueli promoted stronger social safety nets to respond to lost incomes as a result of the health crisis. ‘We need to push from a feminist position for basic safety precautions, such as systems to protect basic income and an insurance scheme for the unemployed.’

To support women’s economic empowerment during COVID-19, Ms Penjueli suggested positive subsidies for farmers to ensure food pricing is at a critical level. Direct budget support to government from development partners can also help, if designed well.

She argued that, to be effective, budget support ‘needs positive conditionality, targeting social safety nets and systems’. Ms Penjueli added there are also opportunities to re-design the taxation system, with more emphasis on wealth and corporate taxes.

Brenda Andrias, Programme Manager of UN Women's Safe and Prosperous Districts Programme in Papua New Guinea shared that 80–90 per cent of market workers are women.

'When the markets were shut down, the women experienced a massive income reduction,' Ms Andrias said.

She explained how common livelihoods for women in the Pacific such as market vending, farming, fishing and daily wage earning, are very often in the informal sector where income is not secure and there is no insurance, paid leave or safety nets.

'When there are economic shocks and people can't trade, women with informal businesses such as market vendors, have no other way to access money,' Andrias said.

'We can look at ways of diversifying their income streams so they do not rely only on trade. And even if there is an increase in women's income, there is also the issue of women's rights in the decision making about that income. We need to work with families so that they understand the rights of women to make decisions over household income,' she said.

The webinar was hosted in Suva, Fiji and broadcast across the Pacific and the world via Zoom and Facebook Live. It was the first in a series of webinars being planned by a regional women's economic empowerment (WEE) roundtable group that meets quarterly, hosted by *Pacific Women's* Support Unit. The WEE roundtable brings together stakeholders to contribute to the body of knowledge about what women's economic empowerment looks like in the Pacific and how women's economic empowerment can best be supported in the region.

To learn more about what the panelists had to say about the changes brought by COVID-19 to women's paid and unpaid work and how economic priorities can be reformed to be more equitable and responsive to the needs and priorities of all women, watch the recording of the webinar here: <https://pacificwomen.org/resources/a-summary-of-pacific-womens-webinar-on-womens-economic-empowerment-and-covid-19/>