

New Leads, advisers and staff at the *Pacific Women Support Unit*

Federated States Of Micronesia Regional Republic Of The
Marshall Islands Tonga Tuvalu

SHARE

April 9, 2020

New co-leads, technical advisers and senior programs officers were welcomed to the *Pacific Women Support Unit* in February 2020. Taking precedence in their new roles is the safety of staff, partners and Pacific communities as the COVID-19 pandemic affects the region and the world.

Pacific Women and partners are adapting plans and activities based on this evolving situation, adjusting to disruptions in their operations while preparing for increased service demand. With country borders closing across the world, *Pacific Women* advisers will continue providing support to our partners, including remotely.

The new advisers, staff and partners continue to be supported during this crisis by the Support Unit's new co-leads: Tara Chetty and Leonie Whyte.

Co-leads Partnerships and Programs



No strangers to the Support Unit, Tara and Leonie have taken up the new co-lead Partnerships and Programs roles, respectively.

‘I’m very excited to be sharing the leadership role of the *Pacific Women Support Unit* with Tara,’ said Leonie. ‘Since 2015, the Support Unit has provided a range of technical, operational and management support available to our 153 partners across 14 countries. We have an incredibly committed and dynamic team working to progress gender equality across the Pacific region.’

‘I really like the structure of having this partnership to lead what is a really amazing team,’ added Tara. ‘It also reflects the spirit of the program across the region which is also about partnerships, whether it’s between Pacific Islanders and Australians coming together to work on gender equality or between program partners working on gender equality.’

Welcoming new advisers and senior program officers

Two new senior program officers joined the Support Unit in March 2020: Salaseini Tupou and Lanita Waleanisia-Spillius. Salaseini and Lanita will provide multi-country support to partners from the Support Unit in Suva.

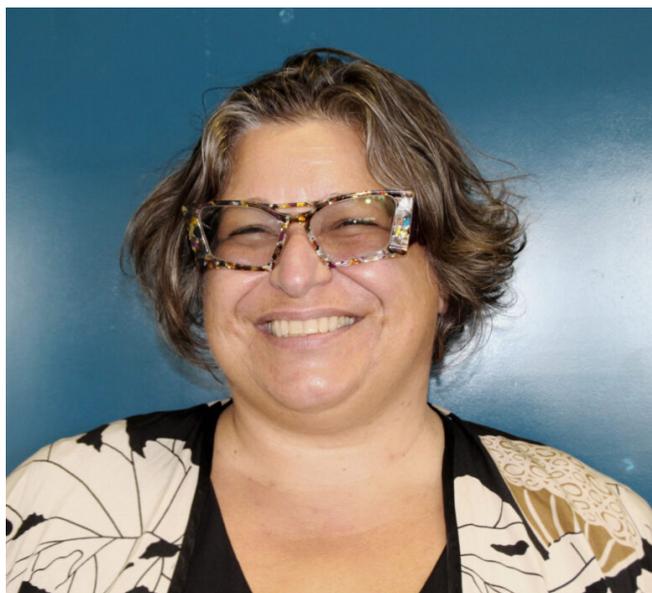


Additionally, four new advisers were welcomed to provide technical expertise to initiatives and organisations supported in the Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu. The new advisers are listed below, with individual profiles further down this page:

- Sonali Owen is the new Family Protection Adviser to be based at the FSM Department of Health and Social Affairs in Pohnpei. She will support stakeholders to provide comprehensive prevention, protection and support services for survivors of sexual and family violence.
- Wilma Eileen is the new Capacity Development Adviser to be based in the North Pacific. She will provide institutional strengthening and capacity development support to the **Chuuk Women’s Council (CWC)** and **Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI)**.
- Tai’atu Ataata is the new locally-engaged women’s economic empowerment (WEE) specialist. She is supporting the **Tonga National Centre for Women and Children’s** WEE project.

- Brigitte Leduc is the new Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser based within the Gender Affairs Department in Tuvalu. She will provide ongoing skills development and mentoring support to established GESI mechanisms.

Brigitte Leduc – Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Adviser, Tuvalu



‘I want people to be happy and have all the tools and opportunities they need to fulfil their aspirations individually and collectively. We’re all on a quest for happiness. Gender inequality doesn’t contribute to happiness for women, neither for men,’ says Brigitte Leduc, new recruit at *Pacific Women*.

Brigitte considers herself fortunate. She’s the first in her family to study at university where she took up social and cultural anthropology; she has always been interested in ‘other people culture, different views on life, different knowledge and wisdoms’.

She moved from Canada 23 years ago to live and work abroad in North Africa then Nepal before coming to the Pacific nine years ago, where she ‘fell in love’ with the region. To date, her work across the region has provided an opportunity to work with all the Pacific Island countries and territories in some way, but she’s yet to visit Kiribati and Nauru.

‘I love it. I don’t want to go work anywhere else,’ she shared at the *Pacific Women* adviser orientation in February 2020.

‘I feel connected.’

‘I’m living the life I dreamed of when I was 15 years old and there’s very few people who have this privilege to really like the work they’re doing [and] to like the people they work with.’

Her passion from her work is based on a very simple idea:

‘I believe in change,’ said Brigitte. ‘I came from a family where we were encouraged to dream....but if you’ve never gone outside of your village, if you were never encouraged, or even it was forbidden for you to dream, you don’t know that life can be different.’

Looking forward to her new role as *Pacific Women* Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Adviser, supporting the government’s process in mainstreaming gender and social inclusion, strengthening capacity of the Gender Affairs Department staff and civil society organisations, Brigitte is also excited about moving to Tuvalu. The scale of the country and national context is a perfect setting for applying lessons learned from across the region:

‘For me, it’s also about learning how people in Tuvalu navigate broad social change, not just gender equality,’ she said. ‘In a small community, it’s easier to observe. So, how people navigate their life in all these changes and how we can develop better approaches to bring social change that benefits as many people as possible.’

Sonali Owen – Family Protection Adviser, Federated States of Micronesia



‘I want to contribute meaningfully to women and children flourishing. The people I’ll have the privilege of working with, they’re the experts... and I’m looking forward to being part of the change process,’ says Sonali Owen, new recruit at *Pacific Women*.

Sonali Owen has followed a few professional threads in her life, all weaving a tapestry of structural advocacy and change. As a social worker with experience working with children, youth and families, she developed a keen interest in the program development policy space. The last of the three being what led her to Tuvalu’s Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports as a volunteer with Australian Volunteers International (AVI), cementing her interest.

‘A real passion of mine is systemic work... thinking holistically about solutions,’ she shared at the *Pacific Women* adviser orientation in February 2020.

‘This means considering the person in the context of their environment. How do they experience their connection to culture, community and family? How is legislation impacting on them and their ability to access certain supports? What does access to justice mean to them?’

In the Federated States of Micronesia, Sonali’s work as *Pacific Women* Family Protection Adviser will be broad:

‘It’s not just structures, prevention or support. It’s working holistically with the community and being flexible with capacity building approaches.’

‘What I see ahead of me is seeking to learn, understand and really connect meaningfully with my counterparts.’

Tai'atu Ataata – Technical Specialist: Women's Economic Empowerment, Tonga



'It is personally very satisfying to help women broaden their economic opportunities so they can provide education, food and shelter for their children and family. This, in turn, benefits the family, community and the country,' says Tai'atu Ataata, new recruit at *Pacific Women*.

Tai'atu is an entrepreneur who's 'done the full circle of public-private' in Tonga, Nauru and Solomon Islands in her career. With a drive to 'provide for [her children] and their education', she is now supporting the Tonga National Centre for Women and Children's (TNCWC) women's economic empowerment pilot project as *Pacific Women* Technical Specialist: Women's Economic Empowerment.

'This role is a great opportunity for me to use my skills to build the capacity of the local staff in TNCWC so they can effectively implement their project as well as support the participants,' she shared at the *Pacific Women* adviser orientation in February 2020.

'I believe I have practical skills... so I will be able to advise the project participants about the challenges of starting, running, managing and growing a business.'

Tai'atu is also sharing her professional expertise with the younger and newer staff members of the centre, providing them with capacity development support with project implementation:

‘Capacity building involves having patience and empathy to mentor, coach, inspire and uplift my counterparts.’

Along with sharing her expertise, she is also learning along the way ‘the challenges that [the participants] have had’ and seeking to improve the project as a result.

Wilma Eileen – Capacity Development Adviser: Gender-Based Violence, Federated States of Micronesia and Republic of the Marshall Islands



‘To see change in women and to give them support....is where my passion and commitment comes from,’ says Wilma Eileen, new recruit at *Pacific Women*.

Wilma started her journey with ‘counselling missionary work in [her] head’. She started off working with children in church clubs, the elderly in a retirement village and young women in prisons, seeking to bring happiness and love where there was hardship. Returning from Sydney to come back home to Fiji, she saw an opening at the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre; for the 13 years that followed, as a Counsellor Advocate and Trainer in an effort to end all forms of violence against women and girls across the region.

With her wealth of knowledge and hands-on experience, Wilma’s challenge ahead is supporting the Chuuk Women’s Council (CWC) and Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI RMI) as the *Pacific Women Capacity Development Adviser: Gender-Based Violence*.

‘It will be a different environment, everything all together,’ she shared at the *Pacific Women* adviser orientation in February 2020. ‘But I’m looking forward to the challenge. I’ll be learning a lot of things: relationships between husband and wife [in Chuuk and the Republic of the Marshall Islands], how they handle domestic violence and the legislation around violence against women.’

With the learning, Wilma is looking forward to working with *Pacific Women*, partnering with the two organisations in her new role and ‘making history with them’.