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**Striving to measure improved gender equality and the
empowerment of women in the Pacific ***

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Striving to measure improved gender equality and the empowerment of women in the Pacific¹

The Pacific region's commitment and capacity to measure and monitor degrees of gender (in) equality and the status of women remains partial at best. Many important indicators about Pacific gender issues remain uncounted, miscounted or under-counted. Although all Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) have endorsed the Pacific Platform for Action for the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality (PPA), all but 3 independent countries² in the region have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and several have national women's/gender action plans/policies, few have demonstrated their genuine commitment in the sense of devoting adequate resources to implementation and reporting. Only 3 Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have formally submitted a CEDAW report to the UNCEDAW Committee, national women's machineries mandated to implement government's gender commitments remain extremely under-resourced and marginalised within governments, and few PICTs have made significant inroads in making the legal and institutional changes that are required to fundamentally improve the status of women and influence decision-makers. The fact that comprehensive sex-disaggregated data and gender indicators remain the exception rather than the norm in the region exacerbates the lack of policy attention to gender issues.

So what is the status of gender indicators in the Pacific region?

As highlighted by the UN World's Women 2005: Progress in Statistics publication, the Pacific region (defined as Oceania), along with Africa lags behind other regions. Attention to gender statistics and indicators has been reinvigorated somewhat by the MDG agenda and subsequently the 2005 Beijing+10 and 2004 PPA reviews, leading to the endorsement of the Revised Pacific Platform for Action for the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality 2005-2015. These and related initiatives, including the 2004 Pacific Regional MDG report have repeatedly highlighted the dire state of gender statistics and indicators in the region. This sad state of affairs is reflected in only partial visibility of PICs in the UNDP Human Development composite Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and Gender Development Index (GDI), due to unavailability of data for the indicators which make up the GEM and GDI.

The two overarching findings of the PPA review were that there is both a lack of gender indicators by which progress can be measured; and a lack of baseline data in most countries or absence of time frames to monitor such progress. Other key findings of the review were that despite the PPA's comprehensive coverage of gender issues, it was non-strategic in focus, a common problem of development plans in our region. The PPA was also found to not adequately distinguish between national and regional actions, making the development of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at regional level difficult. Essentially there needed to be a prioritization of issues with the setting of some measurable targets, much like the MDG process, so as to facilitate improved baseline data collection and widespread analysis.

In response to the PPA review, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) agreed to establish certain capacities within the organization to improve the situation, such as the creation of a Social Statistician position. This is part of a bigger plan to develop a PPA database to track progress on the status of women in the region and make it widely accessible for improved policy and decision-making in PICTs. The

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² Nauru, Tonga & Tuvalu.

position is only now under recruitment and will be part of a revamped SPC Human Development Programme aimed at assisting governments prioritise and mainstream thematic policy issues such as gender, youth and poverty.

Despite the positive contributions of the MDG framework and the 2004 PPA review, it is fair to state that there remains a fundamental lack of attention to the collection and analysis of data to measure gender equality and empowerment of women. Unfortunately there also does not appear to be much political will to improve the situation. Although, National Statistical Offices (NSOs) exist in every PICT with all having conducted a population census in the last 10 years and analysed some of the data; and preparations have begun for the next census round, none have mainstreamed gender into their systems and processes. Reasons for this are varied: but essentially the issues are about a lack of political will, perceived competing priorities and low levels of gender awareness and capacity, across the board. Hopefully this will change with the recent endorsement of Pacific Island Forum Leaders of the landmark Pacific Plan for strengthening regional coordination and collaboration. The plan includes a stand-alone Strategic Objective to Improve Gender Equality, and inter alia, identifies the upgrade and extension of country and regional statistical information systems and databases across all sectors to support effective policy making through the provision of sex-disaggregated data. Periodic Pacific Plan reporting against the Improved Gender Equality strategic objective will require improved gender data at national level, based on the GEM, GDI, MDGs and PPA.

It is important to note at this point that the status of other types of statistics in the region is not necessarily much better and the same can be said for other thematic development issues such as poverty, culture and youth. In most countries, analysis of census data takes significantly longer than necessary; it is often difficult to access sectoral data and information; and regularising data collection and analysis systems across sectors in order to standardize reporting on national policy implementation is a challenge due to 'territorial' attitudes and data ownership issues. As a result, developing mechanisms and processes for coordinating all of this valuable information for the purpose of reporting on international commitments such as CEDAW and the MDGs remains a huge challenge. Even more so, when already over-burdened national planning and statistical offices are approached in a fragmented manner.

In the case of gender commitments, responsibility for implementation and reporting is usually relegated to under-resourced national women's machineries (NWMs) which have little influence over central agencies. It would seem however that the above difficulties could be relatively easily overcome if there was the common understanding and purpose to the collection, analyses and dissemination of statistical information towards improving development outcomes, to which gender perspectives could be effectively mainstreamed. Bringing these policy frameworks together and building bridges between NWMs and central agencies, so that national data and statistical systems are improved to support national development as a whole - rather than remaining segmented and uncoordinated – is critical.

Localizing international benchmark gender indicators and targets

The endorsement of MDG 3 on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, provides a strategic entry point for mainstreaming gender into national development plans and for better gender data and indicators on which to base public policy. The MDG process has also brought high level international understanding of the centrality of gender for development and the achievement of all the MDGs. Nonetheless, MDG targets and indicators can be gender-blind if not interpreted by gender-aware policy planners and statisticians. In the Pacific region, it is fair to say that significant work remains to build understanding amongst government bureaucrats of the fundamental role and attention to gender as a strategy for positive human development. Also that MDGs can be appropriately engendered to provide an accountability framework which will assist reporting against other government gender commitments such

as CEDAW. This is an area where regional organisations can play a key value-adding role if we are serious about a cohesive approach to sustainable development.

It is now generally accepted international gender discourse that MDG 3 on Gender Equality is very narrow and that its corresponding targets and indicators are completely inadequate to measure the breadth of what it means to improve gender equality and empower women. This argument can be viewed as particularly relevant to the Pacific if one considers the critical emerging gender issues that have been highlighted in the Revised PPA such as HIV/AIDS, globalization, labour migration, tradition and religion, media/information communication and technology, and peace and security. MDGs also fail to measure specific gender health issues which prevail in the Pacific such as birth complications, access to and availability of contraception and age-specific fertility rates (teenage pregnancy). The challenge therefore is to expand on and localise MDG 3 to the Pacific context in a way which makes collection policy relevant and comparable.

PICs are performing relatively well against MDG Indicator 9 (M: F ratio at all levels of education), although progress is more mixed, and data less readily available at secondary and tertiary levels. While education is indeed relevant, one can argue that this is not a sector through which the true extent of real gender inequity in our region can be demonstrated. More attention needs to be focused on the quality of gender-equitable education rather than access/enrolment rates in support of gender equal education. Similarly, PICs generally fare well against MDG Indicator 10 (M: F literacy ratio), with PIC F: M literacy ratios well into the 90's in 2000. However this does not measure literacy in its broadest sense or in ways that are most relevant to women in PICs, such as basic legal literacy, business literacy for employment and livelihood in a traditional subsistence economy.

MDG Indicator 11 (share of women in waged employment in non-agricultural sector) is clearly relevant to the Pacific as women still tend to be under-represented in official labour force statistics (all PICs in 2000 measured women's share to be less than 50%). Nevertheless this indicator fails to reveal the type or status of waged employment that women are in, gender gaps in wages, and working conditions. Pacific women remain over-represented in the informal sector, making data collection and regional comparison difficult. The definition of employment activity is particularly problematic for the Pacific due to the blurry definitions of the 'informal' sector' and 'subsistence economy'. Pacific islands rely heavily on subsistence activities e.g. fish smoking, traditional crafts, preparation of food, weaving. While these may not fall into formal definitions of employment, they are crucial in the informal economy and heavily reliant on the contribution of women.

MDG Indicator 12 (proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments) is indeed relevant to the Pacific, as the region fares the worst in the world alongside Arab States in terms of women's representation in legislatures. Currently there are 5 PICs with no women in parliament and unless concerted effort and political will is accorded to this issue, it is highly unlikely that any PICs will progress significantly against this indicator. However, there remains a need to develop indicators that measure the relative status of women in decision-making in local government and traditional forms of leadership.

Significant groundwork to expand MDG 3 through the identification of 7 priority areas, 12 indicators and 3 sub-populations, carried out by the UN Millennium Project's Task Force Report on Education and Gender Equality provides a highly valuable reference point to ensuring more holistic measuring and monitoring of gender equality progress within the MDG framework. That being said, these indicators will need to be further contextualized for ownership and relevance in the Pacific regional context.

For example, land ownership and property rights as a measure of women's rights and empowerment needs to take heed of the legal framework which governs whether or not women have the right to own/inherit land. In the case of Tonga, where women currently do not have the legal right to own land,

such an indicator would be obsolete for purposes of comparison. Similarly customary land rights need to be taken into account as the majority of land in the Pacific is not owned by individuals and land passage is matrilineal in some areas. Women's greater access to, ownership and control over property, and associated natural resources, undoubtedly signifies advancement in their rights. However, the extent to which land ownership titles can define women's access or control to the land or resources can't be assumed as they are largely defined by Pacific culture and custom. In fact, land reform processes which essentially privatise land to individual ownership may actually constitute an erosion of matrilineal rights as there is no guarantee that women will be consulted, have decision-making power, or indeed retain 'ownership' on paper under legalised terms.

Difficulty in localising international gender indicators such as the MDGs to the Pacific region, or even agreeing on a regional set of gender indicators such as those embodied in the PPA, are compounded by the sheer diversity between national and sub-national contexts in the Pacific, the priority gender issues that countries identify with as a result, and subsequent challenge of building national ownership for regional indicators.

Furthermore it is important to remind ourselves that women's empowerment is largely qualitative and must be self-defined. Empowerment indicators therefore can not be defined by international indicators unless their relevance and value is also shared and defined by Pacific women themselves.

Building national capacities to analyse and use gender indicators

Engagement with Pacific governments regarding statistics and indicators is essential if the region is going to seriously evaluate progress towards gender equality and commit the necessary political will to advance gender issues. Otherwise it will remain lip-service with little concrete benefits for Pacific women. Regional agencies, development partners, donors and NGOs must continue to stress the importance of collecting sex disaggregated data and more importantly, lead by example. Many PICT governments still may not be sufficiently gender-aware to appreciate the importance and urgency of this due to competing priorities and limited resources. Moreover, even if data is sex-disaggregated, it will only become gender-aware if it is used to illuminate a gender issue and/or illustrate a change in gender relations over time. A lot of data and statistics, even disaggregated by sex, may not be shared with the right players, presented in a useful way, and/or used for gender analysis and therefore is not used to advocate for gender-responsive policies and programmes.

Beyond sex-disaggregation of statistics, there is a need for national statistical offices (NSOs) to revamp data set definitions to reflect a balanced gender perspective. An obvious example is economic participation data, partly due to the historical heritage of Pacific countries from colonial economies where formal waged employment dominates. Definitions of economic activity which are based on paid employment are inevitably inaccurate in terms of women's economic contribution when a large proportion of their economic activity is subsistence related and in the informal economy. It follows that time use of women is not captured, and women's role in producing and reproducing society is not acknowledged or valued.

There is an urgent need for large scale investment of resources to gender-sensitise national statistical offices (NSOs) and build gender mainstreaming accountability mechanisms into all aspects of statistical production, dissemination and usage. Implicit in the process of defining appropriate gender indicators, lies closer cooperation and the setting up of strategic consultative mechanisms between NWMs, NGOs, and NSOs. NWMs must be empowered to work alongside NSOs to develop the evidence – based research needed to strategically influence other government departments to allocate the necessary budgetary resources for implementation of more gender-responsive policies and programmes. Equally important is accountability for gender mainstreaming, so that the added value of improved gender data for informing

decisions is maximized. It is here that initiatives to progress Freedom of Information (FoI) legislation in the region can produce positive synergies, if women's organizations and civil society are educated about the benefits of FoI to hold governments accountable to their gender policy commitments.

All the above needs will require significant technical support from regional and international agencies, coupled with harmonization and coordination across agencies. For example, the SPC is now home to an AusAID-supported Statistics Planning project which is essentially about helping NSOs get their act together, regain efficiency and fully perform their mandate. Hopefully in time this will help provide governments and a wide range of users with the statistical information and capacity needed to build the evidence for better informed policy and budgetary decisions. Such initiatives provide windows of opportunity for increased institutionalized attention to gender statistics in NSOs.

Towards a core set of Pacific Regional Gender Indicators

A key focus of the SPC Pacific Women's Bureau (PWB) over the next 18-24 months, in close collaboration with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, will be to establish a core set of gender indicators for PICTs to better monitor progress on gender equality commitments at national and regional level. This is being pursued in consultation with SPC Statistics and Demography Division, UNIFEM, the Demography and Social Statistics Division of the UN Statistics Department and other interested partners. The aim is to identify the best core indicators in terms of regional importance, but also to prioritise which indicators are 'essential' to allow for a practical, workable and meaningful comparison of gender equality progress across countries in the region. Such a core set of regional gender indicators assists with a range of international reporting requirements, including the MDGs, CEDAW and PPA, and is very much in line with the overarching goal of regional cooperation and integration being pursued through the Pacific Plan.

Steps in the process include:

- Review and streamlining of existing PPA indicators for quality, relevance, availability, and practicality to collect
- Rationalise into a proposed core set of gender indicators
- Advocate for ownership of the indicators in national planning processes at key regional forums e.g. Heads of Statistics, National Planners, and Forum Economic Ministers
- Facilitate training for NSOs, academic institutions and CSOs to develop and improve gender statistics at national level
- Strengthen SPC statistical database mechanisms to improve status of gender statistics
- Collaborate with key partners, to promote the use of accurate gender data
- Provide evidence to raise awareness of key regional gender issues to influence decision-making.

Due reference will also be made to ongoing UNIFEM work on CEDAW legislative indicators for the Pacific region to assess countries' level of legislative compliance with CEDAW, based on minimum baseline standards.

As mentioned repeatedly in this paper, resources and machinery for the advancement of gender issues in regional agencies are far from being able to do all of the above, despite much effort. There is a huge need for investment from governments, development partners and donors in the process. Most important is the political commitment and investment of government NSOs, planning offices and finance departments.

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