



**Statement by**

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of the Independent State of Samoa**

**on Behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum Group**

**at the**

**54<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Commission on the  
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**Please check against delivery**

Chairperson  
Distinguished delegates  
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am honored to address the 54<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum UN member states. We express our congratulations to you on your election as Chair of this very important meeting.

Chairperson

We affirm our commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action, and the outcome of the Twenty Third Special Session of the General Assembly and note the importance of the link between the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals and our own Pacific regional and national gender commitments.

We also take this opportunity to thank the Division on the Advancement of Women (DAW) for convening this global review of the Beijing Platform for Action. Pacific island countries make up half of the Asia Pacific region and we strongly support the outcomes of the Asia Pacific regional review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Chairperson

The Pacific region is hugely diverse – in land forms, human and physical resources, customary ways, contact experience and the degree and nature of transition to new social, political and economic systems.

The collective population of our nations is currently estimated to be around 10 million, although this figure is greater as census data for some are over a decade old. Individual nation populations vary from 1,600 (the tiny island of Niue) to 6.0 million (Papua New Guinea). In the Pacific, whole nations are threatened by

climate change. Recent natural disasters, such as the deadly September 2009 earthquake and consequent tsunami experienced by Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga have also been extremely damaging for people and their environments. Pacific women and their families, largely in rural areas, feel the greatest effects of these events.

#### Chairperson

A Pacific regional review of the implementation of the *Beijing Platform* is currently being carried out by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community with funding support from the Australian Government Office for Women. The review shows that there is much to be done in order to progress action towards the critical areas of concern of the Platform. For instance one of the main challenges is the absence of national gender equality policies, or serious weaknesses in their implementation. Many Pacific countries have not endorsed such policies, which are needed to ensure national coordination at the highest level and to ensure that the gender equality policy is implemented in all sector areas. Whilst many countries are yet to endorse such a policy, we applaud the government of Solomon Islands for recently endorsing a national policy on Gender Equality and Women's Development (GEWD) 2010-2015. This policy aims to advance gender equality and enhance women's development ensuring the active contribution and meaningful participation of both Solomon Islands women and men in all spheres, and at all levels, of development and decision making.

Pacific countries are semi subsistence economies and women represent the majority of subsistence farmers. Whilst there have been various attempts by Pacific governments and NGO's to address the issue of women and poverty over the last fifteen years the most notable progress has been made in providing women with access to savings and credit mechanisms and institutions. In Samoa for example, microfinance schemes targets women who are unemployed or not able to access credit from banks continue to provide support for their income generating activities and small family businesses. These schemes are further supported by business training for the purposes of facilitating sustainable income generating development for women in the rural villages. However there is still

work to be done in targeting microfinance projects towards the many women in urban areas of the Pacific who continue to experience dire poverty.

Significant gains have been made in areas such as education and health. The launching of the Government of Samoa's free primary education scheme in early January of this year is a milestone achievement towards meeting the MDGs and other international commitments in achieving education for all in particular the girl child. Gender parity has been achieved in a number of Pacific countries such as Tonga and Palau in both access to education and health services. However, we acknowledge that the quality of educational experiences is difficult to assess. Many governments also recognize the importance of improving women's access to quality health care, with most countries implementing programmes or strategies aimed at reducing maternal mortality rates such as safe-motherhood programmes, nursing and midwifery services and increased awareness on screening for breast and cervical cancer.

Collection of data in the Pacific region is inconsistent making it difficult to analyse progress in many areas of concern under the Beijing Platform for Action. However, there is on-going regional work on gender statistics and indicators focusing on strengthening the capacity of national statistics offices to collect and analyse data to ensure accurate reporting and subsequent work planning.

Chairperson

Violence against women is a major concern in the Pacific region. Recent research in Solomon Islands has revealed that as many as two thirds of women experience physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner and that such violence is widely culturally tolerated. Solomon Islands and Kiribati have recently finalized national surveys on domestic violence and are in the process of finalizing National Action Plans to eliminate it. I am pleased to report that a number of Pacific countries have also adopted "no drop" policies and continue to work in collaboration with NGOs and faith based organizations to combat this violation of women's human rights. As a region we applaud their efforts and hope to learn from their experiences. While domestic violence legislation is absent and urgently

needed in most of our Pacific countries, we applaud Vanuatu for recently enacting such legislation and note that several other countries are taking positive steps toward legislative measures.

At the Pacific Islands Forum in Cairns this year, leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum committed to eradicate sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and to ensure that all individuals have equal protection and access to justice. Leaders reaffirmed support for ongoing action to raise awareness of the seriousness of the problem and its impact on the Pacific, supported efforts to address SGBV and to establish the issue firmly on the political agendas of Forum members.

Of the sixteen (16) Pacific Island Forum countries, three are yet to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Since the last review of the Beijing Platform, Australia ratified the Optional Protocol in 2008. Furthermore, four countries have submitted state reports to the UN CEDAW Committee with two countries scheduled for reporting in 2010.

Other thematic areas of work reflected in CEDAW and the Beijing Platform, including the advancement of women's participation in public life and strengthening of gender indicators, also continue to gain momentum in the Pacific.

The Pacific islands region ranks the lowest in the world in terms of gender balanced Parliaments with 95.8 per cent of seats held by men and only 4.2 per cent of seats held by women on average in the Pacific (excluding Australia and New Zealand). Here much work remains to be done. However, several governments including Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Papua New Guinea are actively investigating options for increasing the numbers of women in Parliament through the use of Temporary Special Measures.

Efforts towards mainstreaming gender across the whole of government have been sporadic in our region, but we are pleased to report that six countries (Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Cook Islands) have recently undergone a stocktake of gender

mainstreaming capacity and will be working with development partners on the implementation of strategies for enhancing institutional capacity. We hope that the efforts and achievements of these countries will provide models for similar work throughout the region in the coming years.

Our Pacific statement would not be complete without a mention on our most critical issue – that of climate change. We urgently call for meaningful participation of women and men from all sectors in national and global climate policies, strengthening a commitment to prioritize the most vulnerable, and strengthening gender-sensitive approaches to increasing access for women to existing mitigation and adaptation funds.

Chairperson,

We warmly welcome the firm decision to strengthen the United Nations institutional arrangements to promote gender equality through the creation of a composite gender equality entity and we urge prompt action in establishing this new entity.

We also acknowledge that progress that has been made can be in part attributable to the strong and effective networking between women's departments, regional and UN organisations and civil society organisations in our region. In this respect, we urge the UN to consider meaningful mechanisms to ensure the effective participation of civil society organizations in the new entity. The diversity of the Pacific, which is often seen as one of our greatest challenges, is also a major strength for us because it compels stakeholders to work collaboratively and in consultation with each other.

We conclude with the message that all members of our group call for all governments and the UN family, to not only reaffirm their commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action, but to put both the systems and budgets in place to allow its realization, and to discuss openly the challenges we face.

Thank you.