



Cook Islands, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu

Market Project in Melanesia

As women in the Pacific are faced with the need for cash for food, education and health, many women are becoming active in the expanding informal economy mainly as producers/vendors in the traditional market places. This is evident in increasing number of street sellers, household mini markets and satellite markets, with the latter emerging slowly, but steadily across urban and rural areas.

The formal economy is evolving as women work out ways to build and capture new markets for example, after working hours on sites where waged workers purchase food and other items for their families on their way home from work.

Studies conducted show that approximately 70% of women's income earned through the sale of food crops is mainly used to support basic family needs, whereas men who monopolize earnings from cash crops or royalties paid by resource developers, (who make up approximately 70%) tend to spend most of what they claim as 'their' money on leisure and pleasure.

UNIFEM Pacific is working to **Strengthen Pacific Women's Economic Security and Rights** and the focus is on women in the informal economy including women vendors in traditional and emerging new forms of markets, trade and micro-businesses. It addresses women's livelihood options, independent incomes and savings, human rights and gender issues in the informal economy, and strengthening of organizations enabling women to dialogue effectively with local government to influence plans, policies, by-laws and budgets.

As part of UNIFEM's support, it is currently involved in building its "Partnerships to Improve Markets Project" being implemented in Vanuatu, PNG, Solomon Islands and Fiji. This project aims to contribute to the improvement of social, economic and physical conditions of women market vendors. Whilst facilitating to ensure that local government (and other bodies which manage markets) are more sensitive and responsive to the key gender issues in marketplace planning, operations and governance.

Recent findings under UNIFEM's Market Project show that women selling at the markets are key players in the informal economy and confirm a set of gender-related problems negatively impacting women market vendors which in turn contributes to this area of the informal sector remaining backward, undeveloped with many lost opportunities for social and economic development.

Throughout Melanesian countries, both rural and urban women depend on marketplaces to sell their agricultural products; local cooked food, processed foods and crafts. Women dominate the markets as vendors. Market vending requires long and arduous hours of sitting and selling in poor conditions with minimal returns. It is taken for granted; there is little regard for vendors rights and conditions of work. Men are usually unwilling to sit these long hours given the negative regard for market vending, tend to consider the long hours of selling as a menial and embarrassing activity.

In addition to this, women market vendors face serious Occupational Health and Safety issues and much work is needed. They sit on market sites for up to 10 hours a day, with no shelter, shade, water or toilet facilities provided and often nursing babies or have infants in their care.

It is estimated that millions of dollars are circulating in the largest Melanesian markets on a weekly and monthly basis. There is also evidence that the taxes paid by market women for the right to sell provide the largest proportion of revenue that keep city councils, provincial and local governments operational.

UNIFEM is now preparing to undertake the second phase of its project to Improve Markets based on building partnerships between key stakeholders, primarily the women market vendors and local governments responsible for managing markets. Women vendors will be supported to form organizations to empower themselves to dialogue with and influence local government on by-laws, policies, budgets, and plans and projects. Local governments will be facilitated to develop more women friendly and gender just strategies for market management and will be exposed to examples and opportunities for new ways of managing markets (including strong, proactive participation and leadership by women vendors) and development and justification of market sites into hubs for information, learning and social, cultural, as well as economic development.

When given the opportunity, women have shown that they are smart, strategic and resourceful in what, where and how they sell at local markets with the potential to earn significantly more than they would in unregulated domestic services or in public service jobs.