

Will visions of gender equality live up to the future Pacific women want by 2030?

by Priya Chattier

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In September, we saw a razzle-dazzle of celebrations when the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were formally adopted by member states at the UN summit in New York. As part of the hype around the SDGs, there was a suite of blog posts – from [girls running the world](#) (Beyoncé style) to [SDGs growing out of country music](#) and some even [falling in love with SDGs](#). Moving beyond SDGs and music tastes, and following on from Matt Dornan’s [post](#) on whether the SDGs represent ‘goals for the Pacific’, I would like to take stock of what’s changed for Pacific women over the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) era, and whether the SDGs have what it takes to achieve gender equality in the Pacific by 2030.

Not only will the SDGs shape the international and regional development agenda for the next 15 years, but most importantly they include a standalone goal on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (Goal 5), coupled with gender-disaggregated targets across all the goals.

The good news

It has taken us almost 20 years since the [Beijing Platform for Action](#) (BPfA) to act on some of its ambitious visions to “end all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere” and integrate a transformative goal on gender equality and women’s empowerment into the global development agenda, targeting social norms on early marriage (SDG Target 5.3), unpaid care work (Target 5.4) and sexual and reproductive health rights (Target 5.6), among other targets. The [1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing](#), from which the BPfA emerged, provided an opportunity not only to reflect on systematic barriers to women’s progress, but also to envision gender equality in all dimensions of life. No doubt BPfA’s strong call to governments and national, regional and international organisations helped in the articulation of a holistic approach to women’s empowerment in the Pacific.

In addition to the BPfA, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other international treaties and regional commitments provided an umbrella framework for ratifying national codes of conduct, and subsequent legislation. For instance, Fiji's ratification of CEDAW in 1995 and its constitutional commitment to adhere to the convention were critical for its adoption of a new egalitarian family law in 2003. Apart from CEDAW, other regional gender-specific dialogues, such as the Pacific Platform for Action (1994), Cairns Compact (2009), [Beijing + 20 Review of Progress for the Beijing Platform for Action](#) in Pacific Island Countries, and Pacific Reports for [tracking progress on the Millennium Development Goals](#) opened political space for Pacific governments and stakeholders to raise concerns, generate awareness and momentum, learn about regional experiences, and apply pressure to advance a gender equality agenda at the national and regional levels during the 'pre-MDG' and MDG eras.

While the impact of the MDGs themselves on gender equality in the Pacific may have been [minimal](#), the various treaties and dialogues that took place during the MDG era nevertheless played a significant role in shaping the policy agenda for women and girls. Since 2000, Pacific women have made [unprecedented gains in education and in access to jobs](#), though women continue to cluster in sectors and occupations characterised as 'female'. The last 15 years saw many countries in the region establish gender machineries, with many more women being appointed at senior management levels in civil service and statutory boards, and more women standing for elections. The recent elections in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Fiji and Solomon Islands offered some good news for the region in terms of women's representation in national legislatures.

Uneven progress with an unfinished agenda

While the BPfA and MDG periods saw much legislation with positive implications for women being passed, much of it has not been fully implemented – so there has been progress, but challenges remain. In the last 15 years, we have seen gender norms changing around roles of women and men, but women in the Pacific are still faced with structural and cultural impediments to their progress. Gender violence continues to plague the region with rising rates of [women killed by intimate partners](#). In some Polynesian countries, culture is used to elevate the status of women to not only [muffle commitments to gender equality](#), but also give a false sense of legitimacy. [Gender gaps](#) in education are particularly stark amongst poorer, rural and marginalised women with negative implications for paid employment. Parliaments in the South Pacific still have the worst representation of women in politics in the world and there is still [a long way to go](#) to reach parity of numbers.

From words to deeds

While there are still many challenges, the SDGs do offer some hope for the Pacific region in tackling the embedded discriminatory attitudes, social norms and customary practices that hinder women's chances of becoming empowered agents of change in their families, communities and societies. As Ashlee Betteridge discussed in a [recent post](#), the transformative goal on gender equality is grounded in a multidimensional approach to development defined by freedom, empowerment and the fulfilment of women's human rights. This goal could offer opportunities for Pacific states and Pacific women and men to continue to shape their development by bringing about meaningful changes in critical areas, such as changes in attitudes to violence against women, increasing men's contribution and participation in unpaid care work, and increasing women's intra-household bargaining power.

Of course, it's not just about translating SDG 5 (and the broader SDG shopping list of 17 goals with 169 targets, many of which also have implications for gender equality) into workable action plans at the regional and national level. Pacific governments will need to [continue the process of institutional transformation](#) requiring significant country-driven initiatives to enable supportive macro-economic and regulatory environments, removing discriminatory laws and policies, and enacting gender-sensitive social protection systems using the women's human rights framework.

As the new global development paradigm for the next 15 years, the SDGs provide a platform for leaders and activists in the Pacific region to continue to build on the opportunities gained over the MDG era, and to renew their commitments to reducing the gap between the promises of international protocols and the realities of women's lives. We may be leaving the MDG era behind, but the SDGs provide a promising operational foundation on which the advances made in that era will not be lost, but carried forward.

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