

## **WPS Coalition Members Meeting, 3rd August 2023**

### **Pacific Women Mediators Network**

Our most recent Members Meeting focused on the critical role of Pacific Island women in mediation, peacebuilding, and humanitarian responses. Our meeting was led by guest speaker Sharon Bhagwan Rolls, a prominent advocate for gender equality and women's rights in the Pacific region. Sharon began her presentation by highlighting a recent collaboration in an article titled "Women on the Front Lines of Pacific Peace Building." , focusing on the connections between Pacific Island women and Australian institutions. Sharon emphasised the importance of connecting across the Pacific with Australian institutions.

A strong theme of the presentation was that an inclusive approach to peace and security cannot be claimed if Pacific Island women are excluded from mediation and peacebuilding efforts. Sharon discussed how collaboration through the WPS Coalition in Australia can address geopolitical challenges and promote inclusive security.

Sharon highlighted the significance of the Boe Declaration and the Regional Action Plan on Peace and Security of 2012-2015. These documents played a pivotal role in broadening the concept of security to include issues like climate change and addressing the exclusion of women, youth, and marginalised groups in peacebuilding efforts. It was acknowledged that the Boe Declaration serves as an anchor in promoting inclusive security practices and addressing critical security challenges in the Pacific. Sharon also referred to the ongoing revitalisation of the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration and highlighted the positive development of including the WPS agenda within the pledge, reflecting a commitment to women's empowerment and participation in peace and security processes in the blue Pacific continent.

The primary focus of the event revolved around introducing and highlighting the critical role of the Pacific Women Mediators Network to WPS Coalition members. Sharon shed light on the network's core objectives, which encompass engaging Pacific women in political processes, nurturing women's leadership within civil society, and mobilising mediators and negotiators during conflicts. A key aim of the network is to build a diverse and intergenerational group of women who actively promote the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.

Notably, the Pacific Women Mediators Network received commendable support in the form of multi-year funding from the Australian government. This financial backing was

recognised as a significant and positive step forward in empowering women in peacebuilding endeavours. Throughout the event, the WPS members gained valuable insights into the network's mission and how it plays a vital role in promoting inclusive and collaborative approaches to peace and security in the Pacific region, particularly by empowering and involving Pacific Island women in these crucial processes.

The event encouraged the Australian WPS Coalition to support the Pacific Women Mediators Network and prioritise peacebuilding efforts at the local, national, and regional levels. The importance of demilitarised investment and feminist analysis in peacebuilding initiatives was stressed.

Recommendations for advocacy include:

- Uplift and supporting Pacific Island, women-led approaches and driving gender-just and human rights-based approaches to conflict prevention and peacebuilding
- Australia and Pacific Island governments must recognise, amplify, and adequately resource the important peace work that Pacific women do – and incorporate this into security institutions and decision-making forums.
- Australia to prioritise a deep understanding of local contexts, including recognizing and valuing the diverse and significant peace work that is already being done.
- Targeted, systematic, long-term investment in civil society organisations to support this work would further promote opportunities for Pacific women to define and drive peace and security in the region.
- Australia's foreign policy within the Pacific should have a keen awareness of the significant contributions diverse Pacific women and their organisations make as mediators and negotiators in conflict prevention, conflict transformation, restorative justice, and peacebuilding.

Addressing the involvement of Australian First Nations women in the Pacific Islands Forum, it was explained that their representation and engagement depended on the individual national governments of the member states. However, the network acknowledged the significance of prioritising the inclusion of Papua and the women living in French-occupied territories in the Pacific Islands. Collaborating with existing networks for First Nations women in Australia was also considered vital for strengthening the region's peace and security efforts.

During the open discussions following Sharon's presentation, questions were raised about deconstructing toxic masculinity traits and the role of academic institutions in addressing these challenges. In response, Sharon highlighted the significance of faith institutions in addressing patriarchal barriers and supporting women's leadership, citing the Pacific Conference of Churches' commitment to promoting gender equality within its institutions.

The impact of the Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme on social and economic aspects, particularly concerning women, was extensively discussed. Participants discussed the potential negative consequences on gender dynamics and national economies due to the migration of Pacific Island workers to other countries under this scheme.

Participants highlighted the need for collaboration among governments, civil society and international partners to drive positive change in peace and security efforts. The event emphasised the significance of continuing to work together to ensure the meaningful involvement of women in peace and security initiatives in the Pacific.

Overall, the event provided valuable insights into the need for inclusive and collaborative approaches to peace and security in the Pacific region, with a particular focus on empowering and involving Pacific Island women in these processes.