

Are Regional Commitments on Gender Equality the Way Forward? An overview of the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality

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Abstract

In October 2017, Pacific leaders endorsed a revised roadmap to achieving gender equality in the Pacific, the Pacific Platform for Action (PPA) on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights 2018 - 2030. This document is a synthesised extension of international and regional commitments made by national governments in advancing implementation efforts towards achieving gender equality in the Pacific region. The PPA is an attempt to regionalise the challenges and provide tangible means of implementation that can support Pacific governments in their implementation efforts. The PPA is inclusive of commitments made to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and the Sustainable Development Goals. Through this paper, I aim to provide an overview of the Pacific platform for Action and argue that regional commitments may be our way forward in fast-tracking implementation of Beijing Platform commitments.

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, world leaders committed to an agenda for action that was aimed at transforming women's lives and reducing gender inequality globally. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was milestone for the feminist movement on a global scale and it brought with it hope in reducing the gendered gaps across private and public spheres. Undeniably progress has been made in advancing the agenda for women's empowerment and addressing gender inequality across the globe, though a lot remains to be done. The Beijing Platform for Action identified twelve critical areas that required urgent action in addressing gender inequality, they are: poverty, education, health, violence against women, armed conflict, economy, leadership and decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights of women, media, environment and the girl child (United Nations 1995, 16–17). This paper provides an overview of how the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted in the Pacific through a regional framework, The Pacific Platform for Action (PPA) for Gender Equality

and Women's Human Rights (Pacific Community 2017). This paper explores the potential and challenges of regional frameworks and argues that contextualised regional commitments may be a pathway for accelerating implementation efforts.

The Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights is not a stand-alone instrument but rather an extension of commitments made on gender equality through international and regional commitments such as International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Platform for Action, Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, SAMOA Pathway and the Sustainable Development Goals (Pacific Community 2017, 4–5). This is particularly relevant because some Pacific countries are not signatories to international frameworks, for example Tonga and Palau have not ratified the CEDAW but have endorsed the PPA (UN Women 2020a; Morgan et al. 2020, 72). For the purpose of this study, Pacific countries refer to the twenty-two members of the Pacific Community¹ that have embraced regionalism as a key tool for regional development and diplomacy (Fry and Tarte 2015). The motivation behind the Pacific Platform for Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights was to “accelerate implementation efforts of gender commitments at all levels in order to achieve gender equality and the promotion and protection of all women and girls, in all their diversity” (Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2018, 3).

The question central to this paper is, are regional commitments on gender equality the way forward? This paper investigates this key question in three parts, through employing a critical discourse analysis. Firstly, it discusses the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and its global progress (and challenges) in addressing gender inequality. The second part provides an overview of Pacific region, explores the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Human Rights and its linkages to the Beijing Platform for Action. This section also reviews the initiatives that have been undertaken by Pacific leaders in upholding their commitments to the Pacific Platform for Action on a regional and national scale, for example national action plans, gender policies and the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED). The paper concludes by considering the effectiveness of a regional framework by considering progress in incorporating the Pacific Platform for Action in the national context.

¹This includes American Samoa, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna.

From the Beijing Declaration (1995) to Generation Equality (2020)

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was meant to be commemorated by a series of events in Mexico and Paris in 2020, however the pandemic saw much of this either postponed or adapt virtually. The Generation Equality was meant to be a vital point of commemoration and mobilisation, a civil society centred global gathering for gender equality (UN Women 2020b). The anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action is nonetheless an opportunity for celebrating progress, strengthening strategies and recommitting to accelerating implementation efforts in addressing gender inequality (Allotey and Denton 2020).

The twelve critical areas from the 1995 Beijing Declaration were later clustered into six overarching themes to align reviews with the Agenda 2030 (UN Women 2018). The clusters align the two crucial frameworks under inclusive development, shared prosperity and decent work; poverty eradication, social protection and social services; freedom from violence, stigma and stereotypes; accountability, participation and gender responsive institutions; peaceful and inclusive societies; and environmental conservation, climate action and resilience-building (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 2019, 2). According to a review of national progress reports in the Asia-Pacific region, sixty-three per cent of the countries in the review identified the adoption of laws, regulations, action plans and policies as one of the key achievements over the review period (Ibid, 3). Overall, the broader Asia-Pacific region has recorded progress across all critical areas to some extent and encourages regional collaborations to accelerate national and local implementation efforts. However, despite regional progress, evidence shows that there is much more that needs to be done in order to bridge the gender gap across identified areas. To put this into perspective I explore evidence from global research on themes under the six clusters above.

Inclusive Development, Shared Prosperity and Decent Work

There has been tremendous work done in examining gender diverse participation in the workforce while simultaneously determining the future of work and what this may look like post pandemic and with evolving technology. According to Balakrishnan and Dharmaraj (2018), inclusive development acknowledges that many groups remain excluded or

marginalised from development projects due to various intersecting factors, such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and socio-economic class. In order for development to be sustainable processes need to recognise that inequality and insecurities are linked and must be addressed through a systemic change of the current political and economic models (Balakrishnan and Dharmaraj 2018). Feminist scholars have long recognised that the political and economic systems are gendered and geared to benefit those profiting from systems of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy.

In actively addressing the issues of inclusive growth, shared prosperity and decent work it is critical to map out the gendered nature of such process. For example, inclusive growth is often assumed to be economic development, which only takes into account the formal economy (Peterson 2014; Elias and Rai 2019). The value of the informal economy, which comprises of unpaid care work and social reproduction are extremely gendered processes across the world, with the burden falling on women and gender diverse communities that remains neglected. It is crucial to recognise that an increase in the number of women participating in the formal economy is not an accurate depiction of inclusive growth. Rather this may mean reallocation of time and energy into both formal and informal economy, which is linked to depletion of energy and linked to time poverty for women (Elias and Rai 2019; Elson and Seth 2019). The concept of decent work guarantees a minimum basis of rights but also tailors development values and principles of action and governance (True 2009, 735; Rai, Brown, and Ruwanpura 2019). Indicators of inclusive development need to account for the gendered experiences and ideologies and investment in ensuring data is disaggregated. If the Beijing Platform were to be meaningfully integrated within national policies and frameworks, indicators need to recognise both formal and informal means of growth, through decent work and living wages, which then fosters a holistic sense of shared prosperity.

Poverty Eradication, Social Protection and Social Services

A recent report by UN Women shows that the number of people living in extreme poverty will increase by 96 million in 2021 and approximately 435 million women and girls will be living on less than \$1.90 USD a day (Aponte et al. 2020, 3). Women, girls and gender diverse populations had already been reeling from systemic forms of discrimination and living in poverty, the pandemic and lack of comprehensive social protection programs is bound to

make this worse. For example, debates around Australia's recovery plan show that women were the most impacted, yet recovery plans are targeted towards male dominated industries and marketed as an encouragement for women to join these sectors (Ribeiro 2020). The statistics are alarming globally and the impact on women, girls and gender non-conforming individuals is devastating and is projected to set back efforts of poverty eradication undertaken since 1995 (Nassif-Pires et al. 2020). The impacts of the global pandemic are multi-faceted and will add to existing barriers for women and girls and restrict states ability to progress on their commitments as intended.

Freedom from Violence, Stigma and Stereotypes

While globally progress on gender equality is happening, the rates of gender and sexual violence continue to rise. Rates of violence against women, girls and gender diverse people have increased exponentially over the ten months amidst the preventative measures of lockdown globally but also against female front-line workers (Aponte et al. 2020, 12). Forms of violence have also evolved since the Beijing Platform for Action was first developed in 1995. Increasing access to digital space and devices has given rise to cyber crimes which continue to be used against women, girls and gender diverse people (Henry and Flynn 2020). To address these evolving forms of violence, proactive changes need to be incorporated in national implementation plans and indicators.

Accountability, Participation and Gender-Responsive Institutions

This aspect is directly related to social, economic and political structures that can create mechanisms for gender inclusive participation, allow individuals to meaningfully engage in decision making processes and demand accountability. Gender mainstreaming efforts have been prioritised globally to ensure that gendered differences between men, women and gender diverse individuals are addressed at all possible levels, particularly when it comes to integrating the Platform for Action (True 2016). True's analysis of gender mainstreaming in international peace and security policymaking show that current efforts remain limited in their ability to challenge existing power structures and require an integrated framework of action and strong leadership (Ibid, 464). In the Pacific context, Slatter and Underhill-Sem (2009, 208) emphasise how the initially the Pacific model of regionalism needs a critical

gender perspective that sustains social cohesion, equity and access in a way that is gender just.

Peaceful and Inclusive Societies

The year 2020 also happens to be the twenty year anniversary for the first ever Security Council resolution on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) UNSCR 1325, it has since had seven subsequent resolution that make up the cross-cutting WPS agenda (Davies and True 2019). In order to fully examine and understand issues affecting peace and security, it is critical to understand the causes of insecurity and conflict in current times. The cross-cutting nature of WPS, Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development goals strengthen the argument of fostering peaceful and inclusive communities through integrated responses. In the Pacific, the WPS agenda was adopted in the form of a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012-2015) and hence since been absorbed in other revised regional documents but not renewed as a regional action plan.

Women have always been at the forefront of political action demanding peace and resisting violent conflict across the Pacific (Ratuva 2019, 43; George 2016). However, scholars, researchers and activists consistently reiterate the need to focus on implementation efforts in the region and locally, given the diversity of issues in the Pacific (Bhagwan-Rolls and Rolls 2018). Davies and True (2019, 14) emphasise that the full potential of the WPS agenda is expansive and accommodates cross-cutting issues such as terrorism, violent extremism and climate change induced displacements. Thus, in order to build peaceful and inclusive societies, a contextually grounded approach needs to be undertaken, one that is aligned to global and regional commitments in safeguarding human security and gender just.

Environmental Conservation, Climate Action and Resilience-Building

The climate crisis is not a futurist threat and an everyday reality for many across the globe, particularly for those in vulnerable states such as the Pacific Islands. Approximately 24.9 million people have been displaced because of weather related disasters in 2019 and over 38 per cent were from South Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific (iDMC Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2020, 14). For many Pacific Small Island Developing States, displacements are an annual occurrence that requires thorough disaster risk management preparation. Planned relocation is not a voluntary decision, but a necessity given the dire

consequences of the climate crisis (Burson et al. 2018; Campbell 2010). Scholars have increasingly recognised that climate change is the result of neoliberal development systems that stem from a chosen political economy and needs to undergo a systemic transformation (Burkett 2019; Adger et al. 2013). Moreover, impacts of climate change and natural disasters are experienced differently by those of varying nationality, ethnicity, class, education, sexuality, geographical location all actively shape individual experiences and cannot be understood in isolation from gender. Scholars have well established that the impacts of climate change are experienced differently by women (Neumayer and Plümper 2007; True 2012; Tanyag 2018). All efforts to respond to the climate crisis and natural disaster need to be informed by commitments made under the Beijing and Pacific Platform for Action to ensure gendered experiences are accounted for and responses are gender inclusive.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action remains a comprehensive guide for addressing issues of gender inequality globally and in its resolution, governments agreed to undertake regional reviews which could feed into the global review process (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 2019). The next section provides an overview of strengths and challenges from the Pacific Islands and territories adoption of a regional platform for action.

The Pacific Platform for Action on the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality (PPA)

In the Pacific, gender disparities that have the effect of excluding women are the result of gendered roles that society assigns to men and women. Attitudinal and structural barriers limit equal and meaningful participation in decision-making; restrict access to justice, inheritance and ownership; and value systems that link masculinity with authority over women in some parts of the Pacific have been detrimental to the progress of gender equality commitments. Pacific governments have made numerous commitments to gender equality and have made progress in legislative reform and policy making, but implementing the new laws and policies remains a challenge. However, the Pacific regions remains the low in electing women into parliament with extremely high rates of violence against women and girls.

The first PPA was adopted by Pacific Island countries and territories in 1994 and included thirteen critical areas: health, education and training, economic empowerment,

agriculture and fishing, legal and human rights, shared decision-making, environment, culture and the family, mechanisms to promote the advancement of women, violence, peace and justice, poverty, and indigenous people's rights (Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2018). This instrument was reviewed in 2004 whereby the thirteen critical areas were clustered into four themes: mechanisms to promote advancement of women; women's legal and human rights, women's access to services and the economic empowerment of women. In 2013, an independent review of the PPA was conducted to assess progress of previous agendas. A revised PPA (2018-2030) was reviewed and adopted at the thirteenth Triennial Conference by Pacific Ministers for Women (Pacific Community (SPC) 2017).

Having personally witnessed both the review of the Beijing Platform for action after 20 years (Beijing+20) and the debates on the revised Pacific Platform for Action, there were apparent strengths and challenges to a regional agreement. Most Pacific Island countries have a bill of rights protected in their constitutions, ensuring basic civil and political rights. Given this rights-based foundation, the Pacific region is primed to commit itself more completely to the international human rights system. However, traditional and customary practices continue to limit and restrict meaningful gender inclusion in private and public realms. For example, the Tongan government unanimously (without public consultation) passed an amendment to Tonga's constitution (Clause 89a) which requires judges to consider custom, traditions and culture in their judgement (Radio New Zealand 2020). The Women and Children Crisis Centre (WCCC) Tonga have expressed grave concerns that this clause may further drown voices of women and girls in the name of patriarchal traditions and practices (Women and Children Crisis Centre Inc. Tonga (WCCC) 2020). Customary practices do not necessarily conflict with human rights principles. However, it is important to be aware of cultural and traditional practices in the region and be able to reconcile international standards to local contexts.

Conclusion

The Beijing Platform for Action remains a key blueprint for addressing gender inequality globally and requires contextual adoption regionally, nationally and locally. I conclude this paper with a few questions that remain unanswered to researcher satisfaction but are critical going forward. For instance, are regional commitments really the way forward or are they just another bureaucratic process that requires government attention, which takes time and energy

away from focusing on national implementation efforts. Has a regional platform for action strengthened Pacific regionalism and the part of the new diplomacy proposed by Pacific leaders? Moreover, a review of the linkages between global, regional and national frameworks and action plans are crucial for future research, making critical discourse analysis an important tool of analysis. Particularly when it comes to mapping progress and learning from policy processes and ensuring these processes are evidence and research informed. In this article I have provided a brief overview of the Pacific Platform for Action and how in its current form it seems to be adding to the strengthening of Pacific regionalism, however whether or not regional frameworks are the way forward needs further elaboration.

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