

CONCEPT NOTE: Safe and Equal Online Spaces – a Pacific cyber safety symposium

Addressing online safety and technology-facilitated gender-based violence in a Pacific context, through local and regional examples and innovative ideas.

Event and dates: 12-14 September 2023, Suva – Fiji

Introduction

In a first for the Pacific, a regional symposium will bring together key stakeholders from across the region working to address online safety particularly technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). This builds on the digital age theme of this year's 67th Commission on the Status of Women and its CSW67 Agreed Outcomes, while also advancing online safety priorities in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

A broad range of stakeholders will be encouraged to attend the Safe and Equal Online Spaces symposium, from civil society to government and regulatory bodies.

The convening aims to address TFGBV by increasing a shared understanding of what works. This includes seeking clarity around roles and responsibilities across government and other stakeholders; working with governments on key legislation and regulatory approaches; and documenting the Pacific's TFGBV priorities including ways to progress the CSW67 Agreed Outcomes. A TFGBV Priorities Document will be collated based on the event's discussions and regional priorities identified.

The Safe and Equal Online Spaces symposium is being held from 12-14 September 2023 in Suva, Fiji, convened by the Pacific Women Lead at SPC programme (PWL at SPC) in partnership with the eSafety Commissioner, supported by the Australian Government. SPC is collaborating with other Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) organisations; the University of the South Pacific (USP) as lead of the CROP ICT Working Group, and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) as lead of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

Situation analysis in the Pacific

This issue of cyber security and ensuring safety and security at the community level are regional priorities as detailed in Strategic Focus Areas Five of the [Boe Declaration Action Plan](#) and in the [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#), under the thematic areas of 'Peace and Security' and 'Technology and Connectivity' (pages 21 and 29, respectively¹).

There is limited Pacific-specific research, information and data available about technology-facilitated gender-based violence in PICTs. Organisations working in this space indicate there is extensive anecdotal information that, just as violence against women and girls is a critical issue in the Pacific (with some countries having twice the global rates of intimate partner violence), so too is TFGBV. While there are positive examples of programs aiming to improve online safety for young people, there is limited data about the online experiences of Pacific children and young people online.

¹ In the 2050 Strategy, under the Technology and Connectivity Thematic Area, it states that 'All Pacific peoples benefit from their access to affordable, safe and reliable... ICT infrastructure and systems... while ensuring culturally sensitive user-protection and cyber security.'

The risks of online abuse are significant for young people who are more prone to be affected by bullying, peer pressure, and unrealistic perceptions of how other people live. Global research indicates that young adults aged 18-29 are most likely to experience online harassment.²

For the Pacific, there is a need for more robust and extensive research and data, including increased sharing of information and initiatives that exist. An initial stage of event planning for this symposium is a desk-based review to:

- List existing and planned Pacific initiatives addressing TFGBV.
- List partners (implementing and funding partners) working in this space in the Pacific, as well as international partners and initiatives overlapping or integrating with Pacific projects.

The convening will enable these stakeholders to come together to learn about different projects underway and planned for cyber safety in the Pacific; lessons learned; innovative approaches; locally led or culturally focussed approaches; gaps in knowledge; available research and data; opportunities for networking and collaborating, and more.

This process aims to catalyse and kick-start a collective cyber safety Pacific conversation.

Background

In the region, there is an increase in internet access for Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) and a proliferation of access for people via smartphones and other devices. Fifteen years ago, it was unexpected that small countries such as Cook Islands, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Republic of the Marshall Islands would have submarine cable.

The emergence of digital technologies has the potential to foster economic growth, increase education and employment opportunities, and elevate voices that are often left behind. However, it also provides spaces for the perpetration of harm at all levels, from individuals to communities and nations. While evidence on the impacts of increased connectivity in the region is limited, anecdotal reports indicate that for children, online harms including cyberbullying and child sexual exploitation and abuse are increasing. Similarly for gender-based violence, experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including image-based abuse, online misogyny, and adult cyber abuse are being reported at increased rates.

Many projects are now addressing the need for online safety, in various forms. There is an opportunity to bring these Pacific-based projects together to share information, manage knowledge, seek potential collaborations and other opportunities. This also highlights a growing opportunity for collective action across initiatives, funding partners and Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) to specifically address technology facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).³

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>

³ For a definition of TFGBV refer to the UNFPA has a [glossary of digital-violence](#) terms.

Target audiences and partners

The Safe and Equal Online Spaces symposium will bring together stakeholders working to address TFGBV in the region, to share details about initiative existing and planned in this space along with insights on current and proposed legislation and regulatory approaches. This includes stakeholders working on the nexus of cyber safety and technology plus across gender-based violence and child protection spaces in the Pacific. Bringing these stakeholders together will assist to better understand what is happening in the Pacific, along with priorities and challenges.

Levels of participant expertise will vary. Stakeholders will include those already leading projects along with those with emerging interests to become more involved in TFGBV.

Participants will include representatives from Pacific Island governments and youth delegates who were supported by SPC to attend CSW67, which had a theme focussing on the digital age.

Following is a general indication of likely partners for the event:

- **Participants and speakers:**
 - Organisations and individuals working in the online safety space with a focus on TFGBV.
 - Young people who represented the Pacific at CSW67, through support from PWL at SPC, along with nominees from the Pacific Girl project.
 - Government ministries working in GBV and cyber security, especially Directors involved in associated legislation and who SPC supported to attend the digital age themed CSW67.
 - Civil society and non-government organisations, development partners, UN agencies, donors and others supporting online safety initiatives in the Pacific and globally.
- **Convenors:** Pacific Women Lead at SPC (PWL at SPC) within SPC's Human Rights and Social Development (HRSD) division, in partnership with Australia's eSafety Commissioner. Convening is a key component of the work undertaken by the PWL at SPC programme.
- **Facilitator:** The convening's facilitator is the University of the South Pacific (USP) in its responsibility for the CROP ICT Working Group⁴, chaired by the USP Vice Chancellor and President. The CROP ICT Working Group has overall mandate and responsibility for ensuring that the vision of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders is effectively advocated, co-ordinated, and facilitated.
- **Partners:** Key partners include the 10 Pacific Island government representatives support by SPC to attend CSW67 this year, along with youth delegates, plus PIFS as lead of the 2050 Strategy.

⁴ The ICT Working Group's active members are (in no order) are: USP; PIFS; SPC; SPREP; PITA; FFA; PIDP; SPTO; PPA; PASO; ADB; ITU, World Bank; Australia; New Zealand; JICA; PIPSO; Forum Troika and SIS. Its focus areas are to: work with donors and business partners in coordinating efforts to develop ICT in the Pacific; implement the Pacific Regional ICT Strategic Action Plan; and to address cyber security.

Objectives

The intention of the convening is to bring together key stakeholders working in the online safety space in the Pacific, to share information and agree on key priorities to better address cyber bullying and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).

The **convening's objective** follow, and may be adjusted once an event Working Group is convened:

1. To undertake information sharing to highlight issues and actions around online safety with a focus on technology-facilitated gender-based violence including positive Pacific action and innovation.

Note: This will involve participants:

- identifying what works to address TFGBV in the Pacific, including challenges and gaps. This is also an opportunity to highlight good practice through examples of online safety Pacific initiatives.
- sharing information to generate an increased understanding of the complexities of online harms, particularly TFGBV and child online protection concerns.
- identifying whether there is a need to prioritise online safety education and regulation, particularly for those most vulnerable.
- seeking and/or promoting opportunities for collaboration and coordination.

2. To bring together governments, policy makers and regulators, law enforcement, civil society and other online safety stakeholders to clarify their various roles and responsibilities to inform a more cohesive approach to address TFGBV.

Note: This will include discussion of current skills and resources to determine practical capacity and approaches to roles and responsibilities. For example, in a TFGBV situation what would be a standard operating procedure including the different roles and responsibilities across service providers, law enforcement, regulators and other organisations?

3. To agree on a brief Priorities Document listing and explaining the agreed priorities (country and regional) resulting from the symposium discussions. This will identify TFGBV gaps and opportunities to be prioritised, including those to be progressed in the CSW67 digital age Agreed Outcomes.

Note: The Priorities Document, which may be one page or more, will reflect key priorities discussed during the symposium around changes in practice, structure or systems that, if improved, will contribute to better addressing TFGBV. This would be a path for the way forward. Optionally, the Priorities Document may include specific Actions agreed to be used as a first step, to build on, towards a future regional declaration.

4. To work with governments to determine specific levels of support needed for any legislative or regulatory work, including in relation to establishing any relevant institutional mechanisms.

Note: The convening will provide an opportunity for participating governments to assess and determine whether they have a need for support, such as for the drafting or amending of legislation. In terms of providing support, this will need to be further investigated by SPC, and its viability confirmed around whether SPC may offer support through the funding of technical assistance.

Forecast Budget and Participants

Participants including speakers:

- Budget estimates are for 80 people to convene in Suva, joined by online participants for specified presentations and panel discussions. Noting this is an initial convening, with a broader convening likely to be proposed in 2024-25 following this initial, trial event.
- The budget will include venue, support services, accommodation and travel plus per diem for non-Suva participants and speakers or panellists.

Events funders/donors:

- SPC HRSD - PWL at SPC (primary)
- eSafetyCommissioner (secondary).

Working Group and event planning including MEL and communications

For the event planning, there will be a Working Group created to discuss and decide on key issues relating to the coordination of the event, in liaison with an Event Management Supplier being recruited short-term by SPC to develop and implement the Event Planning Schedule. Additionally, for the event there will also be:

1. Event Budget (as part of the Event Planning Schedule)
2. Event Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan – to track the achievement of the objectives.
3. Event Communications Plan – to cover the range of merchandise and visibility products, general event promotions and coordination, plus event speeches and communications content.