Supporting Pacific women in business is an Investment Climate Advisory Service of the World Bank Group

Success Stories:
THE WISE WOMEN OF TONGA

IFC is helping a newly formed businesswomen’s association on the Pacific island of Tonga to set up a network that provides support and training in addressing regulatory hurdles and challenges women face when doing business.

The Women in Sustainable Enterprises (WISE) association aims to connect businesswomen across all industries in Tonga and provide them with a platform to lobby for reforms that will encourage women to set up businesses, create jobs, support their families, and foster sustainable economic growth across communities and the country.

Before the establishment of WISE, businesswomen’s voices were not collectively heard at government level, where business regulations are made. Many women also operate informal businesses and are unaware of the benefits of running a registered business. They also lack information on the processes needed to register. A 2010 report by IFC on Gender and Investment Climate Reform in Tonga shows that only 16 percent of the female population operate a registered business or participate in paid work.

WOMEN IN SUSTAINABLE ENTERPRISES (WISE) ESTABLISHED

The Women in Sustainable Enterprises association was established after a group of Tonga-based businesswomen returned from a workshop where 58 women from across the Pacific discussed ‘Economic Opportunities for Pacific Women in Business.’ The gathering was sponsored by IFC and the Australian Government and, after hearing their peers’ stories and about their struggles in business, it energized them to support each other through their own business association.

IFC helped to organize members and set up the initial meetings. After writing their own constitution, the WISE group registered itself as an association in July 2010.

Women in Sustainable Enterprises meeting, Tonga

BENEFITS FOR BUSINESSESWOMEN IN TONGA

Founding member Robina Nakao has been running businesses in Tonga since 1994. She currently has several companies, including a money transfer business, a café, and holiday cottages. As someone with wide experience in operating a registered business, she is keen to share her expertise with other entrepreneurial women.

"Every person in business has challenges from time to time, and can always use a word of advice and encouragement at an appropriate moment," Nakao explains. "At times, a structured mentoring approach may be what is required to take an individual through the development process, and WISE Tonga feels we can be integral in fulfilling this role."

"During the conference in Vanuatu we were inspired and encouraged by the success stories shared by our sisters in..."
the Pacific, who had persevered through the many challenges to become successful businesswomen and entrepreneurs.”

“We felt strongly about how we wanted women in Tonga to develop,” said businesswoman and WISE founding member, Lee Miller, who moved to Tonga from New Zealand 20 years ago. Lee runs a waste management company and a rental car company in the capital, Nuku’alofa.

Established businesswomen like Miller and Nakao believe one of WISE’s key aims is to explain the benefits of registering a business, such as better access to credit, more legal protection, and stronger local government support.

“We want to bring in women from the informal sector, the grassroots area, and nurse them up into the formal sector, so that in the end they pay their business licence, learn to pay tax, and get recognized as women in business,” says Miller.

Results

• Pacific-wide women’s business conference in Vanuatu inspired Tongan business women to form their own association

• Low membership fee to encourage small business owners to join

• Association will provide training, mentoring and a route to the formal business sector

• WISE aims to recruit over 100 members after its initial launch

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Employees at Robina Nakao’s cafe

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