

# **THE SAMOA NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN'S (SNCW) SUBMISSION TO THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW COMMITTEE 20 SEPTEMBER 2015.**

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:**

From the outset, the Samoa National Council of Women (SNCW) believes that Samoa since its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2011, has made commendable progress in realising some of the recommendations made on the 11 July 2011 at the UN Council on Human Rights. However, what needs to happen is a more consistent orientation of all government and non government organisations on rights based developments. More specifically for the advancement of women in politics, the decision in 2013 by the Government of Samoa to change its constitution so that by the 2016 general election; 10% of Parliamentarians in its 45 members house are women is commendable.

The SNCW, is the original and oldest Non Government Organisation (NGO) in Samoa. Its traditional mandate is to support the village council governance and decision making which is the inroad for the needed impetus to support the roles of and advancement of women. It was established in 1953 as the national forum for women in the country; before the government established the Ministry of Women Affairs (MWA) in 1991. Its headquarters is known as the "Mothers' Centre/House of Love" which was built and opened in 1968 through national women contributions. SNCW is one of the few NGOs that owns land and also tries to financially support its core administration. History has it that the SNCW was founded according to modern organisational arrangements when the wives of the paramount chiefs and women representatives decided to amalgamate all the women's health committees into one. The objective of the amalgamation was to strengthen the health services by closer co-operation between the district doctors, district nurses and the members of the health committees (NCW, Inc FPS 6.9.77).

The SNCW aims and objectives according to its Constitution shall be:

- I. To promote the general welfare of women, children and men in Western Samoa.
- II. To create and foster good and friendly relationships between women of Western Samoa
- III. To uphold and maintain true Samoan tradition and customs.
- IV. To uphold and maintain the rights and privileges of the members collectively and individually.
- V. To be the official channel of communication between its members and the Government and any other appropriate authority.
- VI. To take such action as the National Council consider advisable in the interests of its members.
- VII. To co-operate with the Government and instil in its members a sense of service and responsibility towards the government.
- VIII. To develop in its members a sense of loyalty to true Samoan tradition and customs.

- IX. To unite the women of Western Samoa and enable them to work together harmoniously for the benefit of the home, family, village and country.
- X. To uphold and maintain the Christian tradition of Samoan society.
- XI. To create opportunities whereby women of Western Samoa meet and consider questions peculiar to womenfolk and take action which best express their role as women.
- XII. To provide an outlet for social stimulation and cooperation.
- XIII. To make provision for better and fuller education of women and children and to create opportunities in which instruction and training in all branches of social welfare, public health, hygiene, domestic science, agriculture and handicrafts take place.

It is clear from the SNCW mandated constitution that it had a health service bias given the strong engagement of health professionals who capitalised on its outreach infrastructure especially at village level. The Samoan women's health committees during this particular era, was known as the backbone of rural health services in the country. As the Samoan government evolved to a more sovereign independent nation so did the thinking in advancing all women. Hence, the autonomous status of the SNCW started to fragment and history has it that the Western Samoa Nurses Association was again instrumental in the branching out of members from the SNCW to establish a new Women NGO which called themselves as the Samoa Women's Committees Development Association (SWCDA), deliberately translated in Samoan as the Health Committees. This new branch then became one of the two original women NGOs in Samoa and it took away most of the village members from the SNCW to focus on supporting health services.

#### **THE CHANGE IN APPROACH AND FOCUS:**

Social developments within Samoa's growth as a sovereign country had facilitated a series of changes that impacted on the cohesiveness of women's groups at national level. The SNCW's constitutional aims were kind of hijacked by its branched off sister organisation and the establishment of the MWA practically took over the SNCW's mandate. Naturally, the SNCW opted to revive its original/traditional purpose of supporting local governance which when translated to rights based global agreements like the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which Samoa ratified in 1992 and 1994 respectively; means advancing women in public life and politics as well as protecting women and children from all forms of abuse and violence. Accordingly this governance focus has enabled the SNCW to maintain its strong hold on realising most of its aims and objectives despite its cautious pull back from asserting health service support.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS:**

One of the most noted achievements that SNCW has upheld in the past decades is its ability to survive the changes and remains nationally visible on issues when it counts. It has demonstrated women resilience to hold fast on opportunities to develop rights based

developments. The SNCW selfishly guards its reputation as the women organisation of governance leaders' daughters, sisters, mothers and wives who are themselves governance leaders at different but more specifically village level. Its redirection allows the SNCW to sustain its developments according to its constitutional mandate, with the exception of health services as it allows the SWCDA to focus there.

A government championed initiative through the Ministry of Women Community and Social Development (MWCSO) in 1999 established a CEDAW Partnership of government and non government organisations to jointly promote and implement the different CEDAW articles. Likewise a similar partnership for the same purpose with regards to CRC was formed in parallel. The SNCW as one of the Partnerships founding members has been tasked since to focus on the CEDAW article on Women in Public Life and Politics; advocating Good Governance as the protective tool for women and children against violence and abuse. Although the nature of the SNCW's approach is not aggressive, but it managed this year (2015) to convince the government through the MWCSO for support to advocate the increasing participation of women in politics (IPWP) at village level. This was achieved in partnership with the UN Women, UNDP, the Government of Australia and Samoa. The unique feature of this initiative is the SNCW's ability to mobilise a national advocacy movement on good governance emanating from village level that utilised traditional learning tools like Songs, Poems, story telling and oratory speech making. The purpose was to solicit community conversations on good governance as the assured protection of women and children from violence.

## **ISSUES**

It is all very well for the government's coordinating agencies for human rights agreements and conventions to facilitate NGO submissions on the UPR 2011.

- However there needs to be a consistent presence and conversations between the government coordinating agency on human rights and NGOs in order for NGOs to be better informed and on par with the rights based capacity building.
- The government should solicit technical and financial assistance from the development countries to seriously support Institutional Systems Strengthening (ISS) for NGOs. NGOs in Samoa do not exist in the same context that NGOs in the more developed world operate.
- Most are still very dependent on any form of support in order to upkeep its administration and programmes.
- The SNCW despite its efforts to be self reliant also need much support for programming.
- It has managed to operationalise a movement in response to the government's 10% for women in Parliament but its main long term vision for good governance need support.
- It is envisaged that if good governance is facilitated, advocated, communicated and progressed as a national human rights issue, it will in turn bring about the

improvement in every aspect of life in Samoa and more specifically the protection of women and children.

- The SNCW also believes that there is not enough emphasis committed by government to the general population rights for good governance although there is enough rhetoric and noise about it.
- “Faafafine” translated as feminine males are socially accepted in Samoan society in the context of their being the children birthed by their respective mothers; who in their own rights are heirs to land, titles and identities. However, there is a haphazard reference to them in the UPR 2011 that referenced Christian principle concerns on their sexual orientation for which the government was not keen on elaborating on their rights. The SNCW see the general protection of faafafine as an issue as they are being abused, harassed and violated in many other ways including sexual abuse. As a women/mothers organisation, the SNCW recognises a gap in the application of the faafafines general protection.
- There are a number of issues with regards to rural women’s rights to health services. Most of the women living on plantations have isolated their families from the usual social structures in villages where help can be accessed. These are the vulnerable groups of women that the SNCW believes to be still in need of rights based assistance especially with regards to maternal and children’s health. NGOs like SNCW with an extended village outreach are in a better place to help if government is keen on outsourcing the services it provides for NGOs to front up.
- It is important for government to make up its mind on how it purports to utilise and or embrace NGOs in Samoaas domestic development partners. With the continuing reforms of the public sector, government must assist in soliciting NGO reforms in order for them to effectively play their watch-dog role according to the government agendas.
- The apparent transition in functional focus by the MWCSO to be more regulatory, monitoring and policy development leader on social developments nationally warrants a major shift in service provision for the advancement of women which NGOs like the SNCW should be allowed to pursue.
- There are still principal areas of concern from the last UNCEDAW reporting by Samoa which have yet to be addressed. The documented feedback from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women for Samoa’s initial, second and periodic reports of Samoa at its 679<sup>th</sup> and 680<sup>th</sup> meeting on the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2005<sup>1</sup> clearly stated principal areas of concern and general recommendations<sup>2</sup> which Samoa needs to pursue. The SNCW is particularly interested to be supported in addressing the concerns in article 19 to 26.

In conclusion the SNCW commends the Government of Samoa for continuing to uphold, promote and protect the human rights of its people consistent with its cultural and environmental context. Samoa as a small island and least developed State, we have

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<sup>1</sup>CEDAW/C/WSM/1-3 (10-28 January 2005), 24<sup>th</sup> January 2005

<sup>2</sup>UN CEDAW Committee Feedback to Samoa, general recommendations 19-27.

acknowledged the challenges we consistently face in realizing human rights for our people. We recognise the value of collaborating for a common cause as it is important for government and NGOs to work together in a concerted manner with the international community to do just that.

This submission is provided on the 20 September 2015 by:

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