

EMPOWERING FEMALE LEADERS IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

By Paula Jops, CUFA Project Officer

In June 2007 Credit Union Foundation Australia (CUFA) was awarded \$20,000 from the Australian Government's Office for Women to hold four young women's leadership workshops in the Solomon Islands. The three-day workshops are scheduled for February/March 2008 and will take place on the islands of Guadalcanal, Malaita, Isabel and Western Province.

The goal of each workshop is to empower rural women who are involved both in the credit union movement in the Solomon Islands and who are advocates for the financial inclusion of women in the rural sector.

Half of the participants will be women between the ages of 18-26 who will be paired up with a mentor, an older, respected member of the community, throughout the duration of the workshop. Each workshop will feature an intensive process of personal motivation and awareness raising.

The improved skills and knowledge of the women who attend the CUFA workshops can then be used to facilitate advocacy and to create a greater involvement in their own community.

The goals of the workshop are to provide workshop participants with:

- a greater awareness of human development, gender and social issues;
- enhanced teamwork skills;
- financial literacy skills;
- improved confidence and presentation skills;
- greater ability to perform under pressure;
- enhanced understanding of the value of cooperation; and,
- the motivation to contribute their enhanced skills to their community.

Workshops are not stand-alone events. Each group will be asked to prepare a self-directed (but supervised) project activity



during the workshop. After the workshop, each group must immediately begin their activity.

Examples of post-workshop activities might include:

- introducing the concepts of youth savings accounts to local schools;
- volunteering with a local women's group or creating a local women's group; or
- increasing access to financial services for the disabled and disadvantaged.

Progress of individual activities will be reported by each pair and will be distributed to all workshop attendees after the workshop.

More than three-quarters of Solomon Island women live in rural areas. The majority are still reliant on a subsistence economy or are left somewhere in between this type of economy and a monetised one.

Economic activity in rural areas is largely stagnant. By investing skills and leadership training in young women, we plan to instil in them the passion

to go back to their communities and advocate for the financial inclusion of all rural people.

One component of the workshop will be financial literacy. By giving individuals a strong foundation in personal finance, CUFA supporters are investing in their future and preparing them for any unexpected disruptions (illness, death, emergencies, etc) that may come along that will have a profound effect on these women and their families.

Financial literacy is a concept that women can bring back to their families and their communities; therefore, increasing individual and group social capital. Financial literacy also contributes to self-esteem and confidence in making decisions relating to savings habits, credit discipline, entrepreneurial skills and income.

CUFA staff is in the preliminary stages of planning the workshops and a working group has been assembled, made up of Solomon Island Women representing the European Union, the Solomon Islands Credit Union League and the Solomon Islands Health and Reproductive Sector. ■