

CHamoru Women: Guardians of Heritage, Leaders of Resilience

A Roadmap for Guam's Future

White Paper

1. Executive Summary

The event *Women of Guam: Strengthening Heritage and Building Resilience* provided critical insights into the role of CHamoru women in preserving cultural heritage and fostering community resilience. This white paper outlines ten key takeaways from the event, differentiating their implications for policy, governance, and community engagement. These recommendations offer a roadmap for policy makers to leverage the power of CHamoru women in strengthening the island's cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability.

2. Introduction

CHamoru women have historically been central to Guam's social, economic, and cultural fabric. Their leadership, wisdom, and resilience are invaluable assets in addressing contemporary challenges such as economic sustainability, environmental conservation, and disaster preparedness. Every speaker echoed the same truth: the unstoppable force, the raw power, the vibrant energy of Chamoru women.

3. Speaker Takeaways

Opening Remarks – Professor James D. Sellmann

Takeaway: “There’s a well-known quote by Mao Zedong: ‘Women hold up half the sky.’ For CHamoru women, it’s more like 80%. Empowering them is key to preserving and evolving Guam’s cultural identity.”

Keynote Address – Ms. Carlotta Leon Guerrero

Takeaway: “Guam has two key policies guiding the protection of cultural heritage, including ancestral human remains: the Programmatic Agreement on Military Training and Testing (PATT) and the Guåhan 2050 Sustainability Plan. These frameworks are vital for balancing development with the respectful preservation of the island’s cultural and ancestral legacy.”

Laura M. Torres Souder – Writer, ‘Daughters of the Island’ / Kumisión i Fino’ CHamoru

Takeaway: “The CHamoru language is more than communication—it carries the memory of the land, the wisdom of climate resilience, and the strength of cultural survival. It is a language rich with meaning and messages. Preserving it is essential, and CHamoru women must lead its revitalization.”

Rita Pangelinan Nauta – Guampedia

Takeaway: “Digital platforms like Guampedia are essential for preserving and sharing CHamoru history, especially when guided by women who understand the cultural depth behind each story. I do not only reflect on the legacy of our ancestors—I often ask myself what kind of ancestor I will become. To move forward, we must understand the journey of those who came before us.”

Harmony Palaganas – Commission on Decolonization

Takeaway: “Decolonization must include the voices and leadership of CHamoru women, who carry ancestral wisdom and deep cultural insight. As we make decisions, we must remember that everything is connected—land, ocean, and air—and all must be respected and protected together”.

Juanita Cushing Vilorio Blaz – Kurason I Sengsong / Island Girl Power

Takeaway: “Empowering young girls is not about encouraging them to do whatever they want. It is about guiding them with compassion, restoring love for the people, and creating a community they feel proud to be part of. True leadership comes from a genuine desire to help others, not for recognition, but because it is rooted in care and commitment.”

Guam Women’s Chamber of Commerce

Takeaway: “Women’s economic empowerment is inseparable from cultural resilience. Investing in women is investing in Guam’s future. We need genuine connection among us, but also collective strength—a shared sense of purpose that unites us in building something greater together.”

Zina Ruiz – Guam Preservation Trust / P.I.P.I.T.

Takeaway: “Preserving sacred and historical sites is not only about protecting structures—it is about honouring the spiritual and cultural narratives that women have carried through generations, through practices like chant and dance. We did not create this land; we are its beneficiaries. In everything we do, we must ask: who will receive what we leave behind?”

Maria Hernandez – Micronesia Climate Change Alliance

Takeaway: “Climate justice in Micronesia must include everyone—not only for ancestral lands, but for all lands and waters around the world. We need power-building, healing, connection, and solidarity. We must protect ecosystems as we protect each other. We must become water protectors”

Kelly Marsh-Taitano – Roundtable Chair

Takeaway: “Guam has a long and proud history of women in positions of leadership. Facilitating dialogue among CHamoru women not only strengthens civic engagement and collective memory—it ensures that their voices continue to shape future policy, education, and the cultural direction of the island.”

Elena Perez-Alvaro – Event Organizer

Takeaway: “CHamoru women are central to ethical and sustainable heritage protection. Their leadership must be recognized in global arenas. The international community must listen—on Guam, people, culture, and environment are one. None can be protected without the others.”

4. Key Takeaways and Policy Implications

Cultural Preservation Initiatives

Insight: CHamoru traditions, language, and heritage require proactive preservation to sustain cultural identity. **Policy Implication:** The government should allocate more resources for documentation projects, cultural education programs, and community-led preservation initiatives.

Educational Empowerment

Insight: Integrating CHamoru history and language in schools strengthens cultural identity among the youth. **Policy Implication:** The Department of Education should develop curricula that include indigenous history, language courses, and mentorship programs led by CHamoru women.

Economic Opportunities for Women

Insight: Economic resilience is strengthened when women have access to entrepreneurial opportunities. **Policy Implication:** Financial support and training programs tailored to female entrepreneurs should be expanded.

Health and Wellness Programs

Insight: Women's health issues, including maternal care and mental wellness, require culturally sensitive approaches. **Policy Implication:** Health services should integrate traditional healing practices and community-based wellness programs.

Environmental Stewardship

Insight: CHamoru women possess traditional ecological knowledge vital for sustainable practices. **Policy Implication:** The government should involve women in environmental policymaking and conservation initiatives.

Disaster Preparedness and Response

Insight: Women play a crucial role in community resilience during crises. **Policy Implication:** Disaster response training programs should target women as key agents in emergency management.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

Insight: The passing down of cultural knowledge ensures continuity and strengthens identity. **Policy Implication:** Programs should be developed to facilitate mentorship and storytelling between elders and younger generations.

Protection and Healing for Young Girls

Insight: Addressing sexual abuse and rising suicide rates among young girls requires urgent, compassionate action. Shame and silence must be replaced with support, education, and empowerment. **Policy Implication:** Government agencies should fund culturally grounded programs focused on prevention, mental health, and healing, while promoting safe spaces and protective services for children—especially young girls.

Celebration of Women's Achievements

Insight: Recognizing and honouring female contributions fosters empowerment and inclusion. **Policy Implication:** Initiatives such as awards, media representation, and storytelling platforms should highlight CHamoru women's achievements.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

- **Mandate gender-inclusive leadership** policies within local governance structures.
- **Integrate CHamoru cultural studies** into the formal education system.
- **Expand microfinance programs** for women-led businesses.
- **Develop health initiatives** tailored to CHamoru women's specific needs.
- **Create women-led conservation programs** for environmental sustainability.
- **Facilitate intergenerational mentorship networks** to strengthen cultural transmission.
- **Implement culturally grounded programs** to protect young girls from **sexual abuse and suicide**, replacing silence and shame with **education, healing, and community support**.
- **Organize annual CHamoru Women's Leadership Summits** to celebrate progress and foster collaboration.

By implementing these recommendations, the Government of Guam can ensure that CHamoru women continue to be a driving force in heritage preservation, economic resilience, and sustainable governance. Their leadership is essential in shaping a resilient and culturally vibrant future for Guam.