Some examples of gender patterns in the Pacific Islands

Overview

When the inequality gap between men and women narrows, economies tend to grow faster, the poor move more quickly out of poverty, and the well-being of men, women, and children is enhanced.

Societies that increase women’s access to education, health care, employment, and credit, and that narrow differences between men and women in economic opportunities increase the pace of economic development and reduce poverty.

Improving women’s bargaining power has a significantly positive impact on investments in children’s education, health, and nutrition. Women’s bargaining power is, in turn, heavily influenced by their employment status, education, and access to unearned incomes such as inheritances and remittances.

Improving the bargaining power of women would therefore lead not only to beneficial effects on the women themselves but also to considerable externalities in terms of improved outcomes for their families.

Countries that do not fully capitalize effectively on one-half of their human resources run the risk of undermining their competitive potential. Capturing this ‘missed potential’ is a core goal of gender-informed investment climate reform, as the payoffs could be considerable.

Economic Patterns

- Economic opportunities for women in the Pacific are amongst the worst in the world. In 2012 the Economist Intelligence Unit rated the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea as 124th and 125th respectively out of 128 in the world, for economic opportunities available to women. In no Pacific country does economic opportunity available to women rise above the global average.

- In the Pacific, women are significant private sector players, but are mainly in the informal sector – and are frequently home-based focusing on subsistence agriculture, marketing of agricultural products, and petty trading.

- Unemployment is a serious problem for many Pacific Island countries, particularly for young women. For example, in Kiribati, the unemployment rate for young women is 61%, much higher than it is for young men (47%) and domestic labour opportunities are few.¹

• Women are less likely to have title to land and are often disadvantaged by prevailing family, marriage, and inheritance laws and practices. They often have greater difficulty in accessing finance to grow their business, and the justice system for resolving commercial disputes.

• Men own and control the vast majority of formal businesses. Women are significant private sector players, but are mainly in the informal sector – and are frequently home-based focusing on subsistence agriculture, marketing of agricultural products, and petty trading.

• Women’s contribution to the economy however, should not be underestimated. In Solomon Islands, for example, the annual turnover at the Honiara Central Market is $10–16 million, with women responsible for about 90 percent of this marketing activity – both as bulk-buyers from farmers and as retailers.

• In Papua New Guinea annual food production, largely the responsibility of women, has been valued at $55 million per year.

• In Samoa, 80 percent of the private sector is comprised of micro businesses, and women are estimated to head over 40 percent of them.

• In the small coffee growing farms, of PNG women work more hours than men in all productive and household work, and women also work more hours on coffee production than men, particularly during harvesting periods. However, the incentives for women to invest time in productive crops are lower than weighing up the need to invest in farming for household consumption.

• In food crop production women exercise more personal control over production, they can intentionally produce a surplus over their household subsistence requirements (to sell) and are able to control and spend most of cash they earn from selling food crops.

• Women say they can control what goes into the pot at home but have less control over savings.

• For labour in coffee production, women receive, on average, less than a third of that of their male counterparts. Even where women comprise a very substantial proportion of the growers, in most localities extension workers visited more male farmers than female farmers.

• Of the 115,075 companies and businesses registered in PNG only 11% of them are reported to have at least one female owner. Of the businesses registered to women 49% are across only five business sectors including agriculture, construction, professional services, retail and transportations. The sector with the largest share is retail with 14 percent.

• In all countries in the Pacific, women and girls do the bulk of unpaid care work. On average, women spend twice as much time on household work as men and four times as much time on childcare. Women also work longer hours than men overall when both paid and unpaid work is taken into account.
Political Realities

- Numbers relating to women’s political participation in the Pacific remain very low. The Pacific region has long lagged behind other regions in terms of women’s share in parliament. The regional average increased from 6.3 per cent in 1995 to 15.7 per cent in 2015 (+9.4 points), but due primarily to gains made in Australia and New Zealand. Women’s share grew more slowly in the Pacific Islands: from 2.3 per cent in 1995 to 4.4 per cent in 2015.

- In 1995, no Pacific country had more than 30 per cent women in its single or lower house of parliament; the regional leaders were New Zealand and Australia, with 21.2 and 8.8 per cent, respectively. At 7.7 per cent, Tuvalu was the Pacific Island State with the most women’s representation at that time. By 2015, only one country – New Zealand, at 31.4 per cent – has more than 30 per cent women parliamentarians. Fiji, at 14 per cent, has taken the lead among Pacific Island States.

Examples include:

- Vanuatu became the first PIC to reserve 30 – 34% of parliamentary seats for women, contesting the municipal elections under an amendment to the Municipal Act in 2013

- In Samoa, only matai (chiefs) can stand for Parliament. Traditionally, both men and women have the right to be matai. But it is more usual for males to be offered this role, and in most villages the rule prevails that only males can be matai. Only three out of 49 Parliamentarians are women. Samoa was the first PIC to elect a woman to parliament and also appointed its first female deputy Prime Minister in 2016

- There are no women in the Tongan Parliament which is the highest decision-making body in the country

- Palau has a stable political structure with state representation and representative congressional system. Although Palau is a matrilineal country, historically, women’s representation in the national Congress has been limited. Prior to 2008, Palau had no female members of Congress. Since the 2008 elections, the Palau Congress has had three women members, elected to the Senate (PACWIP).

Legal Patterns

- Ratification of human rights treaties in the Pacific has tended to favour conventions that protect group rights, especially those of women and children.

- Tonga is one of the two countries (Tonga and Palau) in the Pacific Region that has not ratified the UN CEDAW Convention, which is aimed at eliminating gender discrimination.

- In recent years there has been an increase in the adoption of domestic legislation protecting various human rights. Between 2009 and 2015 Vanuatu, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Palau, Samoa, Kiribati, Tonga, Solomon Islands and Kosrae passed new family protection and domestic violence legislation however, across the Pacific inheritance laws discriminate against women, especially those concerned with land. In many countries women are unable to inherit or own land.

- Samoan inheritance legislation does not discriminate between men and women. But customary land is not subject to these rules, with land being inherited only by those with customary matai title – predominantly men.

- In many Pacific States such as Vanuatu, a majority of land is in customary tenure systems which are locally variable and fluid. In economic terms this can be both an impediment to foreign investment and an opportunity whereby foreign entrepreneurs and speculator have taken advantage of the lack of regulation on land ownership and tenure.

---

1 Pacific Community (SPC) 2016. Human Rights in the Pacific: A situational analysis/ Pacific Community
2 Ibid
Environmental Patterns

- Women in Pacific countries are particularly vulnerable to climate change because they are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood. Women charged with securing water, food and fuel for cooking and heating face the greatest challenges.

- A lack of sex disaggregated data in all sectors (e.g. livelihoods, disasters' preparedness, and protection of environment, health and well-being) often leads to an underestimation of women’s roles and contributions.

- Women are not only vulnerable to climate change but they are also effective actors or agents of change in relation to both mitigation and adaptation. Women often have a strong body of knowledge and expertise that can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster reduction and adaptation strategies. Furthermore, women’s responsibilities in households and communities, as stewards of natural and household resources, positions them well to contribute to livelihood strategies adapted to changing environmental realities.

- Pacific women have essential skills and knowledge regarding clean water sources, food preparation, agriculture and livelihoods; however, they are often excluded from the decision-making processes around climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as disaster risk-management.

- They also face a number of secondary, intangible impacts in the aftermath of disasters. Often rooted in existing gender inequalities, these impacts can include increased rates of gender-based or sexual violence, unequal access to humanitarian assistance, loss of economic opportunities and an increased workload. After two tropical cyclones hit Tafe Province in Vanuatu in 2011, the Tanna Women’s Counselling Centre reported a 300 per cent increase in new domestic violence cases.

- Numerous examples demonstrate that communities fare better during natural disasters when women play a leadership role in early warning systems and reconstruction. Women tend to share information related to community well-being, choose less polluting energy sources and adapt more easily to environmental changes when their family’s survival is at stake.1

- Recent reports from the Women’s Environment Development Organization and the World Conservation Union show that the adverse effects of climate change are affecting women most, in places like Tuvalu (Kallmeyer 2008, 1). According to studies, young women in Tuvalu are spending an increased amount of time securing water and fuel, due to the scarcity of potable water and resources (Kallmeyer 2008, 1). Increased time spent working to ensure the basic needs of the family can be linked to decreased girls’ attendance in school and lower literacy rates, particularly among young girls.

Social Trends

- Bride price is often a strong tradition in a number of Pacific Island countries firstly, as a public demonstration that the couple is married and thus establishing new ties between families, relatives and clans. Secondly, bride price is to appropriate the notion that the bride is considered to being lost to her own clan. Traditionally bride price was paid with shell money and food, though today the transaction is done in kina. The highest amount would usually not exceed K500. Some men, having paid a large amount in order to be married, feel like they own their wife as though she is his property which he had purchased from her parents’ possession.

- In Kiribati 10% of boys and 19% of girls are married between 15-19 years old. Similarly, in PNG, 3% of boys and 16% of girls are married between 15-19 years old. The age at marriage is an important indicator of exposure of women to the risk of pregnancy. In most societies, marriage sanctions childbearing and married women are exposed to a greater probability of becoming pregnant than unmarried women. Thus, women in populations in which age at marriage is low tend to start childbearing early and often have more children4.

- Violence against women prevalence surveys in the Pacific have shown that the incidence is the worst in the world with over 60 per cent of women and girls having experienced violence at the hand of an intimate partner or family member.

4 [http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/pacific/drive/web_140414_UNFPAPopulationandDevelopmentProfiles-PacificSub-RegionExtendedv1LRv2.pdf](http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/pacific/drive/web_140414_UNFPAPopulationandDevelopmentProfiles-PacificSub-RegionExtendedv1LRv2.pdf)
• In the Pacific, support services for survivors of violence have seen minimal progress in recent years. Significant advances in the Pacific have been achieved in expanding women’s access to justice. However, the implementation of laws, as well as the overall functioning of the judicial and police systems, remains fragile.

• Four out of five Tongan women and girls have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence. These could be women in public service positions, business women, and women working in packing sheds or selling goods at the market.

Two-thirds of women in PNG have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their life – twice as many as the global average.

An ODI study on the cost of DV to business in PNG found that:

• 68% of survey participants experienced gender-based violence (GBV) during the past year, with 47% experiencing more severe forms of GBV.

• On average, employees experienced a total of 7.8 incidents of GBV in the past 12 months and 2.4 incidents of severe GBV. Women experienced an average of 9.4 incidents in the past year.

• On average, each staff member loses 11.1 days of work per year as a result of the impacts of gender violence: 2.0 days lost to ‘presenteesism’, 5.0 days to absenteeism and 4.1 days helping other victims of GBV. For one of the firms in this survey, this means an estimated 26,200 staff days lost per year.

• The cost of staff time lost due to GBV is high. For one of the firms covered, it is estimated to total 300,000 kina; for another, almost 3 million kina, representing 2% and 9% respectively of those companies’ total salary bills.

Population Shifts

• The Pacific region has wide diversity in its urbanisation rates: from small islands such as Guam and Nauru, with 100 percent urban living, to Papua New Guinea, with less than 20 percent. The populations of Polynesia and Micronesia are generally more urbanised than those of western Melanesia. And New Caledonia and Fiji in eastern Melanesia have very different colonial histories from the western Melanesian populations. By 2050, the Pacific region is projected to be 36 percent urban.

• The movement in many Pacific Island countries of almost half the population to urban centers, represents one of the more significant changes in the Pacific island way of life, altering economic, social and gender relations in key institutions such as the family.

• Urbanisation over the decades has changed fundamental social conditions affecting men, women and children in the family, the household and community and at national levels.

• The Pacific region’s economy is more dependant on remittances than any other world region, including such Asian countries as the Philippines, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

• Life expectancy at birth measures the overall health status of a population. Improved mortality rates mean that healthier people live longer lives. Life expectancies in Australia it is 79.3 and 83.9 years for males and females which is about 10 years longer than a person in Vanuatu (70 males and 73 females), and about 20-25 years longer than a person in Nauru, Kiribati or PNG (58 males and 63 females).

• Women outlive men by 3-5 years and with advanced in health care, support and decrease rate of fertility (see below), the population of older women is growing in the Pacific Islands.
The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is the average number of children born per woman. The Pacific Island countries are characterized by a wide range of fertility levels; from as low as 2 children per woman in Palau and Niue, to almost 5 in Samoa (and Tokelau). There are a number of reasons why fertility rates remain high in some countries, and they vary. Often high fertility rates are associated with low use and/or access to contraceptives, lower educational levels of women, and/or lower involvement of women in the work force. It can also be caused by the absence of a pension system where people have to rely on the support and care from their children at old age. High fertility rates are often associated with low levels of urbanization and exposure to ‘modern life’. Cultural values and beliefs also play a crucial role.

Education and Health

With the exception of Papua New Guinea, the largest Pacific country, the region has achieved the benchmark for gender parity in education. Several countries however, are below the developing country average for gender parity in primary (Tonga, Nauru and Vanuatu) and secondary (Niue and Solomon Islands) education. Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are also below the developing country average for gender parity in tertiary education.

In a number of countries there are also issues about how gender is addressed in the curriculum as well as the balance between male and female teachers. This impacts on how children and young people view their options for employment and how they consider the relationship between men and women in society and their ability to take action to address inequality.

Pacific countries are generally making insufficient progress against their goals to improve maternal health. As a region Oceania ranks third worst behind Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia.

In the Pacific, where populations are often spread across remote and difficult to access islands, ensuring adequate and appropriate health and family planning commodities is a major challenge.

The Pacific has high instances of adolescent fertility. In Marshall Islands 8.5% and Nauru 8.1% of girls aged 15-19 having given birth. In Vanuatu, PNG and Solomon Islands this is also high at over 6%. Unmet need for contraception adds to women’s expected caring responsibilities and ‘reproductive work’ and the ability for a woman to control her own fertility is fundamental to her ability to participate in society beyond the household level.

In Western Pacific cardiovascular diseases are the leading cause of death for women, while cancer ranks second for both sexes. The likelihood of dying from respiratory diseases is also higher in Western Pacific than it is in any other region of the world.

---