What is Pacific Girl?

Pacific Girl is a $4.5 million multi-country program to support adolescent girls in Pacific Island countries achieve their full potential. Evidence shows that 'educated, healthy and skilled adolescent girls will help build a better future, advance social justice, support economic development and combat poverty.'[1] Pacific Girl demonstrates Australia's commitment to focus on adolescent girls' needs, rights and opportunities.

Managed under the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*) program, Pacific Girl funds projects with selected civil society organisations in Pacific Island countries. These Pacific Girl partners are working to equip adolescent girls to make informed decisions, while engaging with the boys, parents, carers and communities in their lives to build more supportive environments.

Pacific Women recognises the principle of 'nothing about us without us' and seeks to address the underrepresentation of adolescent girls in decisions that affect them. This includes through involving adolescent girls in program design and delivery.

Pacific Girl has been designed by and for adolescent girls:

- 220 adolescent girls in six countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu) participated in focus group discussions, with some recording their thoughts in the Pacific Girls Speak video (available here).

- 88 people from 16 countries completed an online survey (including 20 under the age of 20).

- 20 adolescent girls from Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu participated in the Pacific Girl design workshop, bringing their priorities and solutions to a wide network of stakeholders (35 people from Australia and Pacific Island countries). Some of the adolescent girls wrote and performed a song during the design workshop (available here).

Pacific Girl has six grantee partners:

In Federated States of Micronesia, Chuuk Women's Council will reach 150 marginalised girls through a young women's empowerment course. The curriculum will focus on sexual and mental health, healthy relationships and developing future goals.

In Fiji, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement's (FWRM) Girls Arise program will work with girls aged 10–12 to build their life skills and confidence. Pacific Girl will enable FWRM to extend activities to girls outside of the capital Suva, share the organisation's approach in a toolkit and raise the profile of girls' issues with decision makers.

In Papua New Guinea, Equal Playing Field (EPF) Safe Schools, Strong Communities program seeks to reduce violence by educating girls and boys about the importance of respectful relationships, using sport as an entry point. Pacific Girl will help EPF reach adolescents in 40 schools (up to 6,000 girls) and work with teachers on establishing Safe Schools Frameworks.

In the Solomon Islands, the *Girls Rise Up!* project, led by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in partnership with CARE International, will reach 200 at-risk girls to develop their confidence, skills and knowledge and establish supportive peer networks. Girls will be provided the opportunity to safely advocate on issues that affect them, while service providers will be engaged to support the needs and priorities of the girls.

In Tonga, the Talitha Project's My Body! My Rights! program will reach 375 girls aged 10–14 in four locations around Tonga, including outer islands. The program will improve community perceptions of girls' value, amplify girls' voices through creative media and train girls on health, sex and sexuality education and self-esteem.

In Vanuatu, CARE's 'Laef blo mi, vois blo mi' program will work with girls aged 12–19 in rural and remote areas of Tafea province. Pacific Girl will enable CARE to extend life skills and respectful relationships education to younger adolescents in schools, including around 800 adolescent girls. The program includes male peers, teachers and families to ensure girls are safe and respected.

---

[1] LO, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WHO (2010). 'Accelerating Efforts to Advance the Rights of Adolescent Girls: A Joint UN Statement', United Nations.

What difference is Pacific Girl making?

Pacific Girl supports partners in Pacific Island countries to deliver projects that improve adolescent girls' lives.

Pacific Women takes a strengths-based approach to working with partners and recognises the skills, expertise, experience and insights partners hold that are unique to their context. The Pacific Girl team supports partners by providing expertise on child safeguarding, engaging adolescents, organisational systems and governance, monitoring, evaluation and learning (including action research with adolescent girls) and communications for development. The Pacific Girl team works with each partner organisation to develop a specialised plan for supporting that partner's work with adolescent girls.

Pacific Girl brings a wide network together to learn from adolescent girls and each other

Pacific Girl Learning Network

The Pacific Girl Learning Network allows Pacific Girl partners to learn and share what works and what does not work to empower adolescent girls. Adolescent girls will have a space to engage with each other and advocate for changes to how families, communities and governments respond to their needs. Pacific Girl will learn from others who work with adolescent girls and their communities in the region and around the world and will trial approaches by adapting them to the local context. This international approach is particularly important on issues where current programming in the Pacific region does not yet offer strong evidence on what works, such as engaging adolescent girls with disability or LGBTQI+ young people.

The Pacific Girl Learning Network is open to anyone in the Pacific region with an interest in improving the lives of adolescent girls, including community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, non-government organisations, service providers, educators, policy makers and adolescent girls themselves. The aims of the Pacific Girl Learning Network are:

- Through action research, learn from adolescent girls directly about what does and does not work in the programs in which they are engaged.

- Learn from relevant research from the Pacific region and globally about what is working and not working in programs aiming to improve the lives of adolescent girls.

- Provide evidence and data about the lives of adolescent girls in Pacific Island countries to demonstrate to policy makers the nature and scale of the challenges adolescent girls face in reaching their potential, and to provide possible solutions.

Regional learning meetings

Through the Pacific Girl Learning Network, Pacific Girl partners and adolescent girls will take part in learning exchanges to share what works in their programs. Annual regional learning meetings will bring the network together to hear directly from adolescent girls, present and discuss research and evaluation findings and discuss a selected aspect of programming or girls' issue in more depth. Pacific Girl partner monitoring data will be aggregated and will contribute to the *Pacific Women* database.

The Pacific Girl inception workshop

In 2019, a Pacific Girl inception workshop will be held in conjunction with the inaugural regional learning meeting. Adolescent girls, Pacific Girl partners and the Pacific Girl team will learn about individual country-level projects and how they will contribute to the regional Pacific Girl program. Pacific Girl team members will also work with partners to build their capacity to implement effective projects for adolescent girls and conduct project monitoring.

What is the context of Pacific Girl?

Adolescent girls in Pacific Island countries share the challenges faced by adolescents in other parts of the world. But in this region, those challenges are compounded by the effects of climate change and the specific realities of life in small island states.

The region is spread across the world's largest ocean and is far from homogenous. Within the Pacific region, young people are dealing with very different contexts. In the larger countries of what is commonly termed Melanesia, challenges are exacerbated by the effects of high population growth, growing inequalities in urban areas and a weak distribution of benefits from resource-led development.

In the small island states of the North Pacific, geographical remoteness from major markets, population pressure on limited land resources, overfishing, environmental damage and the threats of climate change all have a major impact on young people's prospects of earning a decent living. Countries like Samoa and Tonga face similar resource constraints, providing a narrow set of future economic options for the younger generation.[2]

What do Pacific girls experience?

Challenges

Adolescent girls from Pacific Island countries say they are facing common challenges:

- Teen pregnancy, early or arranged marriage and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health information.
- Violence and abuse in the home and community, including sexual violence.
- Bullying, including cyber bullying, negative peer pressure and body shaming.
- Lack of access to education and employment.
- Family expectations of unpaid care and domestic work.
- Lack of voice and influence in their community or at national policy making levels.
- Culture, custom and beliefs that restrict the rights of girls.

Solutions

Responding to these identified issues, Pacific Girl partners will:

- Provide life skills and leadership training.
- Deliver respectful relationships programs.
- Deliver sex education programs for girls that promote open discussion.
- Promote equal access to education.
- Work with parents so they understand the realities and challenges of girls' lives today.
- Build confidence and skills of adolescent girls through sports and creative arts.
- Develop cyber safe skills and promote online safety.
- Engage service providers to promote better responses to girls' needs.

---

[2] UNICEF Pacific (2011) State of Pacific Youth Report.

What do adolescent Pacific girls say?

The issue: violence against women and girls	Rates of violence against women and girls are generally high in Pacific Island countries, with lifetime prevalence rates for intimate partner violence ranging from 25 per cent in Palau to 68 per cent in Kiribati.[3] Adolescent girls experience violence from intimate partners but also experience other forms of family violence, including violent discipline by parents and relatives, which is widely tolerated in many countries. Reports from Samoa and Fiji show that violence between spouses, by parents against children and between other family members, is widely tolerated and condoned.[4]
Quotes	'With all the rape cases in Fiji, parents are becoming more strict on their daughters. One of the girls we interviewed, her mum never allows her to leave the house. I have another friend whose parents force her to wear really long clothes and cover her head. They believe that the more skin you reveal the more chances you have of being raped. The matter is not about the clothing.'

'In Vanuatu, the situation with rape… girls will try to tell the police and parents but it is not discussed. Rape happens within families with uncles and fathers, there are cases of incest; just last week a six-year-old girl was raped and murdered.'

'In Fiji the leadership roles are dominated by men, [while] we are used as sex objects. …our biggest fear is our safety.' |
| **The issue: information and education about sexual and reproductive health and rights** | Research shows that adolescent girls face multiple challenges in accessing information and resources about their bodies, sexuality and reproductive health. Barriers include stigma and discrimination, physical access to health centres and legal barriers. There is very little comprehensive education regarding sexuality made available to adolescent girls and boys. School-based 'family life education' programs are often limited and face opposition from some teachers, parents and other gatekeepers.

While some country studies show about two thirds of young people are sexually active, fewer than 20 per cent of adolescent girls aged 15–19 and less than half of adolescent boys in the Pacific report having ever used a modern method of contraception.[5]

Adolescent fertility rates vary among Pacific Island countries, from 20 births per 1,000 adolescent girls in Tonga and Niue to the highest rates of 81 and 85 per 1,000 adolescent girls in Nauru and the Republic of the Marshall Islands respectively. Papua New Guinea at 65 and Vanuatu at 66 births per 1,000, also have quite high rates of pregnancy among adolescent girls. Teenage pregnancy rates can be much higher for girls living in rural areas, with rural adolescent fertility rates of 70 per 1,000 adolescent girls in Solomon Islands and the region's highest rate of 100 births per 1,000 adolescent girls in rural areas of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.[6] |
| **Quotes** | **Impact on schooling and work**

'In Fiji, there are a lot of cases of teenage pregnancy. There are a lot of girls that stopped schooling because they have a baby, so what happens is the girls stay out of school for nine months, have the baby, give it to their parents, go and do foundation at university.'

'In Vanuatu, when girls are pregnant no one helps them to look after the baby, it's really hard for them to find money to raise the children.' |

[3] See UNFPA Family Health and Safety Studies.
[4] UNFPA (2005) Samoa Family Health and Safety Study, and Save the Children Fiji (2006) The Physical and Mental Punishment of Children in Fiji: A Research Report; in Ali, Shamima (2006) Violence Against the Girl-Child in the Pacific Islands Region
[5] Burnet Institute Submission, New Zealand Parliamentarians' Group on Population and Development (NZPGPD) (2012). 'Pacific Youth: Their Rights, Our Future.'
[6] UNFPA Pacific Sub-regional Office (2014). 'Population and Development Profiles: Pacific Island Countries'; NZPGPD (2012) above, p 1; Wilkinson and Walls in Chetty and Faleatua (2013). 'Keeping it Under the Mat: The struggle for sexual and reproductive rights in the Pacific Island region,' DAWN.

Quotes	**Lack of open communication** 'Parents don't teach us about sex and all of that – it's like a taboo – they don't mention it…they think that if they tell us, we will go and do it, but we will go and do it anyway and other people will tell us about it, information about sex is available everywhere.' (Fiji) **Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and contraceptives** 'In Vanuatu teenage pregnancy is an issue, and the challenge is some of the girls are afraid to ask questions and to seek advice on sexual health and family planning because Vanuatu is very small and girls are scared that if they go and ask the nurse for advice about sexual protection the nurse will talk to their parents. So the girls are shy to ask for help and advice.' 'In Tonga girls are unaware of how to stay safe, they are unaware of condoms and contraceptives.' Paraphrased quote: 'I have had sex education training with International Planned Parenthood Federation through Fiji Women's Rights Movement's GIRLS program. I will decide when to have sex and when to get pregnant. I won't let a boy or man decide this for me. But religion will play a part in my decision. I will only have sex when I am married and I will only get married after I finish my education and have a job.' (Fiji) **Cyber bullying** 'In Vanuatu a young girl was blackmailed by her boyfriend to send him naked photos and video of her which he uploaded on social media using a fake account.'
The issue: access to education and economic empowerment	Adolescent girls in the Pacific region are generally accessing education better than those in other developing regions. The majority of Pacific Island Forum countries have achieved parity in primary education, although there are still significant challenges for girls entering secondary education in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.[7] In other countries, such as Samoa and Fiji, girls tend to perform better than boys at secondary level.[8] Nonetheless, this is not necessarily translating into better opportunities for economic empowerment for women and girls. Many young people finish school without the requisite skills to take advantage of often limited employment opportunities. The social norms around care work and both formal and informal sector employment create additional barriers for young women.
Quotes	'Girls who drop out of school think less of themselves, not much opportunities for them.' 'One of the girls we interviewed failed her exams and heard a lot of negative words, which brought her self-esteem down. Because of all the negativity, she never went back to school. For boys they can fail but for girls once she fails she is out. Her parents didn't empower her to go back to school. Parents are more concerned about their image and reputation than the child's education – they didn't want the child to repeat because of the bad image it would create for them.' 'We (in Vanuatu) also have the issue of lack of transport to access education and health. Girls have to walk long distances to access health facilities.' 'Only few girls have the advantage to complete their studies because their parents/guardians are very supportive in investing in their education.' (Papua New Guinea) 'My parents care for my future because I'm going to lead the future generation in our country so therefore education is key to becoming a good leader.' (Tonga)

---

[7] Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2013). '2013 Regional MDGs Tracking Report,' p 31.
[8] Ibid, p 32.

The issue: custom and cultural norms that limit girls	Custom and cultural norms influence all areas of girls' lives, including their sexual and reproductive health, bodily autonomy and safety, access to information, ability to influence decision making and access to education and resources. The way these norms are experienced, reinforced and change over time vary across the region, as well as among and between different areas within the same country.
Quotes	'In Vanuatu our challenges are slightly different, especially for young girls in the rural areas. Custom/cultural norms stop girls from speaking up. Leaders don't want to listen to them. In our custom, younger people are not allowed to speak. Also, with custom there is the issue of arranged marriage at an early age. As soon as you are born there is already an arranged marriage for you. With arranged marriage, girls are sold to another tribe in exchange for land or other custom goods.'

'Most of the household work and taking care of the babies and children are done by girls. Boys never do anything.' (Autonomous Region of Bougainville)

'There are a lot of elderly people in my households, so they need a lot of care. This is very hard as I'm trying to concentrate on my studies but if I don't do what they say then I will get in trouble.' (Tonga)

'Marshallese culture is for girls to do household work.' (Boy participant, Republic of the Marshall Islands)

'Girls are forced to get married resulting from situations faced by them with their family. Most time, girls are not treated well and not given attention and they resort to getting married on the assumption they will find a better life elsewhere.' (Papua New Guinea) |
| The issue: climate change and natural disasters | The effects of climate change and natural disasters are gendered, with girls particularly vulnerable to violence, loss of access to education and other negative effects. The Pacific region is at the frontline of climate change, with both big and small island states facing more extreme weather patterns, including more frequent and severe tropical cyclones and droughts, as well as rising sea levels. Responses to disasters often ignore the specific needs of adolescent girls during the crisis and in post-disaster recovery. |
| Quotes | **Natural disasters**

'In Tonga, there is also the issue of natural disasters and climate change – Tonga was recently affected by a Category 5 Cyclone Gita. Tonga was really badly affected – my school was damaged and my classroom only has half a roof – we don't know where the money is going. There is an issue with the relief assistance and the lack of proper structure with the way relief is being distributed.'

'In Fiji we have similar issues with natural disasters – the Fiji Women's Rights [Movement] Girls Club had scheduled to go and visit a village in Ra, Nabalasere, but we also had a problem with that. Due to the weather as we have had [Tropical Cyclone] Josie and [Tropical Cyclone Keni] so there have been problems with access by road. After [Tropical Cyclone] Winston, the message we got from communities is that they had to prioritise who had to go to school due to the impact of the cyclone and families would send the boys to school and girls were kept back to help mothers to do housework and collect water etc. This is an issue with girls access to education.'

'Vanuatu had similar issues after [Tropical Cyclone] Pam with damage to school buildings. Many kids had to attend schools in tents which is not comfortable for students because it is too hot and kids can't concentrate. In Ambae, after the volcano erupted last year 2,000 students were evacuated permanently to go to Santo. A lot of parents are struggling with keeping their children in schools.' |