

Thematic Brief | Gender and COVID-19 Economic Recovery Measures in the Pacific

This Thematic Brief provides a gender analysis of the economic impacts and recovery measures to COVID-19 in the Pacific. It has been developed by the Support Unit of *Pacific Women*, connecting more than 170 gender equality initiatives funded by Australia and implemented by over 160 partners across 14 Pacific Island countries. *Pacific Women* is one of the largest global commitments to gender equality. It partners with governments, local and international non-government organisations (NGOs), private sector, disabled people's organisations, coalitions and others to improve the political, economic and social opportunities of Pacific women and to end violence against women and girls. Its emphasis is on partnerships and locally-driven development.

Five Key Messages

The five key messages outline the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Pacific. The messages also highlight how a lack of gendered economic policy and budgeting results in economic response measures that benefit men, whilst failing to reach women. Information collated, while not exhaustive, draws from an extensive range of Pacific and global sources, including civil society organisations and anecdotal evidence from *Pacific Women* partners, and the findings of a gender analysis of the economic recovery measures in Fiji, commissioned by *Pacific Women*.¹

1. The gendered impacts of COVID-19

- Women face specific economic vulnerabilities and responsibilities.
- Women are over-represented in the informal sector and the full scale of women's financial loss due to the impacts of COVID-19 therefore remains unmeasured and unrecognised.
- Women's and adolescent girl's unpaid work and care responsibilities have increased with school closures, youth unemployment and enforced migration from urban to rural areas.

2. Assessing economic measures through a gender lens

- COVID-19 economic recovery plans have so far paid little attention to women's and men's different economic roles, needs, and vulnerabilities.
- Seemingly gender-neutral economic measures can have major gendered impacts, disproportionately affecting the opportunities, wealth, and wellbeing of women and girls.
- Understanding how economic response measures impact women and men will assist governments to plan for stronger, more gender-equal economic outcomes.

3. Social protection and austerity

- Government measures intended to supplement workers' immediate drop in incomes, are unevenly implemented between women and men.
- Social protection measures, together with adequate public services, are critical to responding to the needs of the most vulnerable.
- Increased pressure on government revenue and increased debt will likely result in the implementation of austerity measures (typically cutting social security measures and public services) which disproportionately affect women.



4. Measures to support businesses and employees

- Women are typically in lower paid and less secure roles than men and are not eligible for formal support measures such as wage support or access to social insurance.
- Women-owned businesses are often not eligible or able to access many of the opportunities and financial benefits aimed at small businesses.

5. Sector targeting

- It is critical to consider the gender dynamics of major industries targeted with financial support, as women and men are unequally affected by the expansion of different industries.
- Economic stimulus measures supporting the infrastructure, construction, and roads industries increases employment opportunities for men with low opportunities for women.
- It is critical that the sectors women participate in, regardless of their size and contribution to GDP, are recognised and supported in economic response planning and budgeting.

Summary

Health pandemics have specific and severe impacts on the lives of women and girls. Since the COVID-19 outbreak first had reported cases, the gendered impacts have been documented in the Pacific and across the world. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the crisis as gender inequalities are exacerbated resulting in women and girls facing even higher rates of violence, undertaking more unpaid domestic work, being less able to access essential health services, and being more vulnerable to economic hardship.

The long-term economic impacts of COVID-19 on the Pacific will be significant. Economic forecasts across the Pacific have predicted major reductions in gross domestic product (GDP) growth, and an economic recession for 2020 and beyond. Countries are currently experiencing high levels of unemployment, increasing rates of poverty and hunger, a major drop in fiscal income, growing debt, trade disruptions and a large reduction in business activity. The way that governments respond to, and manage, these economic challenges has major gendered implications in both the short and long-term. While economic recession affects both women and men, the impacts play out in ways that are gendered and uneven in both paid and unpaid work. The pandemic has laid bare the many existing inequalities in society and, in particular, the disproportionate hardships, discrimination, and poverty faced by women.

Throughout the Pacific, women's participation in unpaid care and domestic labour is high, and their participation in paid labour is low. Women overall earn less than men and are more likely to work in low-paying, informal and precarious work.² The impacts of COVID-19 will likely accelerate these trends as women are forced out of the formal labour market and/or are required to care for community members.

While government response and assistance is crucial to mitigating the impacts of COVID-19, women are typically overlooked in COVID-19 economic response initiatives.³ This is often because women in the Pacific operate mainly in the informal sector where there is little financial assistance or access to social protection. Given the informal nature of production and sales in the informal sector, the scale of women's financial loss often remains unmeasured and unrecognised. Loss of women's incomes also have a higher impact on family wellbeing due to women's spending priorities, where income typically goes towards household needs.

Governments around the region have responded with various measures designed to mitigate some of the economic impacts of COVID-19, including national stimulus packages and reallocated public spending. How this expenditure is generated, allocated, and spent has gendered implications; and the extent to which economic measures are accessible and responsive is different for women and men.



Message 1 The gendered economic impacts of COVID-19

Women in the Pacific are particularly vulnerable to the economic impacts of COVID-19 because they earn less than men and are more likely to work in low-paying, informal and precarious work.⁴ In addition, women have taken on additional care and domestic labour, and are experiencing even higher levels of men's violence.

While COVID-19 infection rates are low in Pacific Island countries, communities continue to be greatly affected by the impacts of response measures to the global pandemic, such as travel restrictions, school closures, curfews and especially border lockdowns. Response measures have reduced the international tourism industry to virtually zero, affected import and export industries, lowered food security, and impacted the mobility of seasonal workers, students and professionals across the region.

The livelihoods that women typically rely on in the Pacific (such as carers, vendors, farmers, fishers and daily wage earners) are very often in **the informal sector** where income is not secure and paid leave rarely exists.⁵ For marginalised women and girls, including lesbian, bisexual and trans women, employment is particularly scarce and often precarious and/or unsafe.⁶

Increases in the cost of food both imported and locally produced has a major toll on women, who are usually responsible for sourcing, preparing and cooking food for their families. The high reliance of small island states such as Nauru, Tuvalu and the Republic of the Marshall Islands on imported food means that they are exposed to spikes in food and fuel prices, leading to higher risk of food insecurity for women (who are more likely to have lost their jobs). Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu have incurred major damage to commercial and subsistence crops due to recent severe tropical cyclones. The poor weather and panic buying in Fiji led to huge (temporary) price increases in staple foods. In April 2020, staple root crop prices increased by 250 per cent (taro) and 54 per cent (cassava).⁷ This has knock-on effects for farmers, market-vendors and consumers.

The drop in business and fluctuations in the cost and availability of food impacts on **women market vendors**, who make up to between 75–90 per cent of all vendors in the Pacific.⁸ This is a critical and sole source of income for many women (and food security for the community), yet they are without any safety nets or entitlement to annual leave or insurance.⁹ Most major municipal markets closed during government lockdown periods, leaving women without income and unable to cover business expenses and household basics.^{10 11} Rural women market vendors in Fiji reported losses to their income as customers decreased while people who have lost their jobs and are spending less.¹² More recently, there has been a proliferation in food entrepreneurship and agricultural activity as people, particularly women, have moved to different sectors in an attempt to generate an income.¹³

Vendors and producers have also suffered major loss of income due to the closure of the international tourism industry. Many women rely on the **tourist handicraft industry** for their livelihoods, as informal producers or vendors. In Vanuatu, women make up 96 per cent of open-air informal market vendors catering for tourists.¹⁴ In some smaller countries, women make up the majority of service sector jobs such as in hospitality and retail, areas highly vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19. For example, an estimated 70 per cent of pandemic-related job losses in the Federated States of Micronesia affect women.¹⁵

Overall, women-led/**owned businesses** in the Pacific report major barriers as being lack of finance and cashflow as well as lack government support and stimulus. More women-led/owned businesses in the Pacific have reported a significant decline in revenue (73 per cent women-led vs 47 per cent men-led) and more have temporarily closed or have reduced staff and hours.¹⁶ This particularly impacts micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs) such as the Duavata Sustainable Tourism Collective of Fijian eco-tourism operators who, in a January 2021 meeting, confirmed all operators in the collective were forecast to close in coming months, and before the end of year.



For the many women involved in the **fisheries industry** in the Pacific, fluctuations in exports have major consequences for their financial security. Women are low on the value chain of the seafood industry and make up the majority of seafood processing workers¹⁷ (such as cannery workers in Solomon Islands and the Republic of the Marshall Islands) and are more likely to be laid off from contracts that do not provide access to benefits or subsidy packages.¹⁸ Women fishers have also undertaken increased unpaid care work, impacting the time they are able to dedicate to inshore fishing and seafood gathering.¹⁹

Women are also disproportionately impacted by remittance flow insecurity. Remittances comprise a major part of many Pacific Island country economies (43 per cent and 24 per cent of GDP in Tonga and Samoa, respectively). While remittances have remained relatively stable in the Pacific after an initial drop, insecurity in remittance flows disproportionately impacts female-headed households, leaving them at much higher risk of poverty.²⁰ For example, 90 per cent of female-headed households in Tonga receive income from remittances.²¹ In Tuvalu, households rely on remittances to buy imported food with 50 per cent of remittances in Tuvalu spent on food.²²

Women and girls who work away from home in service jobs and seasonal work face loss of livelihood as well as protection risks due to restricted movement and loss of income.²³ Loss of livelihoods increases the risk of girls being removed from school in the future and engaging in risky and/or exploitative activities such as transactional sex to support themselves and their families. Women in urban areas, and female-headed households in particular, are at risk of housing insecurity and eviction as they are unable to make rental payments. Disabled people's organisations (DPOs) have also highlighted food security is emerging as a major concern for people with disabilities who have lost jobs.²⁴ Women with disabilities who are dependent on precarious and informal work are at high risk of poverty and destitution.²⁵

Women also do the vast majority of unpaid domestic labour and care work (in the Asia-Pacific region, women perform 80 per cent of total hours of unpaid care work, representing three times more than men).²⁶ The outbreak of COVID-19 has greatly increased their unpaid work, including time spent caring for out-of-school children and unemployed relatives as well as engaging in community disease prevention. Increases in the cost of food, both imported and locally produced, has a major toll on women, who are usually responsible for sourcing, preparing, and cooking food for their families.

Working mothers are facing difficulties as paid child carers are not working due to concerns of infection, negatively impacting the financial security of both the paid carers (who are women) and preventing women from going to work.²⁷ A Market Development Facility (MDF) report in Fiji stated that 60 per cent of women business owners are increasingly having difficulties in balancing work and home responsibilities as a result of COVID-19.²⁸ This occurs in the context of women in both urban and rural areas spending far more time on employed and housework than men.²⁹ In Fiji, women in paid work spend on average 15 hours working *more* than men per week, doing paid work combined with unpaid domestic work (64 hours versus 49 hours).

An emerging consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic reported in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tuvalu is the increase in women's unpaid labour caring for relatives in the home, as people have moved from urban areas to rural areas. In Fiji and Samoa, workers previously engaged in the tourism sector are returning to their home villages typically surviving through subsistence farming.³⁰ In Tuvalu, there is movement of people to the outer islands away from the capital of Funafuti, as families move back to the relative security and remoteness of the islands.³¹ In Solomon Islands, repatriation of urban workers to home provinces has been enforced by the government. The migration to rural areas is therefore increasing the workload of rural women as they are expected to care, cook, and clean for relatives who have migrated from urban centres, meeting traditional family and community obligations but adding to their existing workload.

Prolonged school closures and economic recession due to the COVID-19 pandemic lowers girls ability to pursue further training and education, and increases the potential for early pregnancy, forced marriage and sexual exploitation.^{32 33} More than 6,000 students in PNG have failed high school in 2020,



a 50 per cent increase from 2019.³⁴ Overall, girls have less access than boys to online learning options (boys are 1.8 times more likely to own a phone to access the internet, based on estimates).³⁵ *Pacific Women* partners working with **adolescent girls** have reported an increase in domestic labour for girls who are at home due to school closures and increased challenges pursuing their school work. Staying home during lockdown reinforced gendered norms and divisions of labour, with adolescent girls expected to take on additional housework and caring responsibilities. The migration from urban to rural areas is reportedly pushing girls attending school to return home to their extended families, where they undertake housework and care for siblings and children.³⁶ The possibility of girls not returning to school is increased if families can no longer afford their education expenses and/or need them to support caregiving, generate supplemental income, and produce subsistence foodstuffs. Keeping girls out of school has serious long-term implications for their future opportunities, agency, and prosperity and will undermine national economic recovery efforts by reducing the skill level in the workforce of the next generation.

The importance of economic response measures that are gender-responsive has thus become even more urgent since the outbreak of COVID-19 as women and girls face disproportionate and severe economic impacts.

Message 2 Assessing economic measures through a gender lens

Understanding how economic pressures and response measures impact women and men will assist governments to plan for more gender-equal economic outcomes in the long and short term. Women face specific economic vulnerabilities and responsibilities stemming from expectations that women undertake the majority of unpaid domestic work, have less authority in decision making, and earn less than men in less-secure work. These considerations should be mainstreamed through all budgetary decision making as well as targeted, gender-responsive economic measures.

The long-term economic impacts of COVID-19 on the Pacific will be significant. Economic forecasts across the Pacific predict major reductions in gross domestic product (GDP) growth and an economic recession for 2020 and beyond. While Kiribati and Tuvalu are still projected to grow, economic growth in other Pacific Island countries dropped substantially in 2020, particularly in Fiji, Vanuatu and Palau given their high reliance on the international tourism industry.³⁷ The two biggest economies in the region are projected to increase slightly in GDP growth for 2021 (Fiji at around 1 per cent with PNG's GDP to grow by 2.5 per cent).³⁸ However, this is dependent on changes to border closures and trade restrictions. Furthermore, this has put pressure on government revenue and increased government debt. For example, in Fiji Government debt is projected to increase from the equivalent of 49.3 per cent of GDP at the end of FY2019 to 83.4 per cent at the end of FY2021.³⁹ The Fiji Government has also revised down tax collection by 34.4 per cent, or FJ\$1.06 billion for financial year 2020, putting pressure on government revenue and long-term spending.

In the short term, governments around the region have introduced various measures designed to mitigate some of the immediate economic impacts of COVID-19, through national stimulus packages and reallocated public spending (see Box 1). Several governments announced additional expenditure in April 2020; as a percentage of GDP, the funding packages range from 0.6 per cent and 0.8 per cent in Papua New Guinea and Fiji respectively, to 5.2 per cent in Tonga and 6.9 per cent in Samoa.^{40 41} The variation in these figures is also due to countries access to reserves, such as sovereign wealth funds (Kiribati, and Tuvalu).⁴²

Beyond these immediate fiscal responses to COVID-19, some countries including Fiji, made major changes to their national budgets, including changes to social protection, industry support, and taxation. The following section considers how these government budgeting and spending measures impact women and men in different ways.



Box 1: Gendered budgeting

Government decisions around expenditure and revenue hold important insight into government priorities and approach to recovery. **Economic policy making and budgeting are not gender-neutral.** How public money is spent, saved and generated, will have different impacts on women and men. Assessing the extent to which government expenditure impacts women and men differently is central to a gender analysis, and to the success of a response to COVID-19 which is inclusive, and gender-responsive.

Message 3 **Social protection and austerity**

The economic downturn resulting from the global COVID-19 pandemic will increase inequality and drive more people deeper in to poverty. In both the local and global economy, the poor and marginalised have been hardest hit. While most Pacific Island countries have been fortunate to avoid major outbreaks of COVID-19, some communities are still at risk of hunger, poverty, and destitution. Marginalised women and girls are particularly vulnerable due to loss of employment and resulting food and shelter insecurity. They may adopt dangerous coping strategies in response to hunger and poverty or be subjected to sexual exploitation; early, temporary and forced marriage; risky sexual behaviour, and trafficking.⁴³

Social protection measures such as unconditional cash transfers, are an important and internationally recognised measure to support vulnerable groups including female-headed households, people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and women with disabilities. Social protection measures are critical to enable people to sustain themselves through the crisis with dignity. The 2019 Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions recommend strengthening cash transfers as an important means of social protection (whilst recognising the importance of removing conditionalities to avoid exacerbating women’s unpaid work).⁴⁴

Box 2: Social protection access

Assessing increases and cuts to **social protection funding reveals which groups are being considered and who may be left behind.** The Asian Development Bank’s (ADB) Social Protection indicator reveals that existing social protection schemes in the Pacific reach more men than women, and spending was found to be nearly five times higher on the non-poor than the poor (those below the national poverty line) in most countries.⁴⁵ It also covers only 31.2 per cent of beneficiaries, thus missing almost two thirds of eligible people. According to the indicator, social protection spending on men is 1.3 per cent higher than expenditure on women. This gender gap exists across all three key areas of social protections: social insurance, social assistance, and labour market programs (2019).⁴⁶

Most Pacific Island countries have not previously had strong government-led social protection systems, relying instead on traditional safety nets⁴⁷ (see Box 2). However, several countries have prioritised social protection in their COVID-19 response plans and annual budgets, while others have announced zero or very little additional social protection spending (Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands respectively).⁴⁸ The most recent National Budget announced by the Fiji Government in July 2020 included one-off payments to specific population groups (including informal workers, people with disabilities, some pensioner groups, and persons living in poverty). Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Fiji have highlighted the lack of social protection available to women as well as cuts to schemes for vulnerable groups.⁴⁹ This included the reduction in monthly travel allowance for pensioners and for people with disabilities, as well as the suspension of the \$1,000 Parenthood Assistance Payment, a social protection scheme for parents and children.^{50 51}



Box 3: Austerity Measures

Reductions in GDP growth, together with lowered tax and increased government spending puts pressure on government revenue and long-term government spending. This often results in the implementation of austerity measures.

Austerity measures typically involve cutting social protection measures and public spending on areas such as health, education, transport and care. Women and their children rely more on public services as they have more care responsibilities (of children, elderly and people with disabilities) and less access to resources to pay for private services.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) across the world have raised concerns with the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) emergency financing to states, highlighting that IMF loan programs are accompanied by conditional austerity measures which will have disproportionately high negative impacts on women.^{52 53} Austerity measures also cut sectors where women (who participate in the formal sector) are more likely to be employed, such as health and education.

Message 4 Measures to support businesses and employees

Low levels of growth and declining employment before the pandemic increased the economic precarity of Pacific Island economies to the impacts of COVID-19.⁵⁴ Countries are now experiencing high levels of unemployment, increasing rates of poverty and hunger, and a large reduction in business activity. Seeking to counter a major drop in economic growth, governments have announced measures aimed at supporting business, including varying levels of tax breaks, temporary utility cost reductions, debt forgiveness, suspension of loan repayments, and wage support to employers.

However, it is unclear the extent to which these economic measures aimed at stabilising businesses and employment are reaching and benefitting women workers and women-owned businesses.⁵⁵ As women operate predominantly in the informal sector, much of their work, production, and transactions (including loans and credit) remains unregistered. They are therefore not eligible or able to access many of the opportunities and financial benefits targeted to the formal sector, such as social insurance, credit, wage support, suspension of loan repayments, training initiatives, and paid leave or benefits.

Women-owned businesses are also much less likely to be registered as formal businesses. They are therefore not eligible or able to access many of the opportunities and financial benefits targeted to small businesses. In Tonga, the women's movement was successful in securing women's enterprises access to government assistance. The FI-E-FI-A 'a Fafine Tonga (FFFT) was instrumental in supporting and representing the voices of 564 women from the informal sector who were impacted by the COVID-19 lockdown to access government grant.⁵⁶

Government measures intended to shore up workers immediate drop in incomes, such as access to social insurance schemes and wage support, are also unevenly implemented between women and men. While government benefits will accrue to those working in the formal sectors, it will miss the majority of women workers who operate in the informal sector; in Fiji 64 per cent of women have informal-sector jobs and women make up little more than one-third (35 per cent) of the tourism workforce.⁵⁷

In Tuvalu, the government used a gender analysis to inform decision makers that women in the informal sector had been disproportionately, economically impacted by the closure of borders due to their reliance on informal handicraft activities and hospitality as sources of income. The rapid assessment conducted by the Gender Affairs Department highlighted the vulnerability of families supported by women's incomes in Funafuti.⁵⁸ This gendered dynamic had previously remained unrecognised in the government response to food shortages and income drops. As a result, the



Minister of Health advised Cabinet that future rounds of financial support to families should target households in which women had experienced significant loss of income.

Changes in pension scheme rules have unequal benefits as women are less likely to receive social insurance or be members of pension schemes. The Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) membership includes 26 per cent female recipients and 74 per cent male recipients.⁵⁹ This gap is driven by men's higher participation in formal employment and employer contributory schemes, increasing women's vulnerability to post-retirement poverty.⁶⁰

While men are more likely to be members of a provident fund, the recent change to fund rules in some countries means that workers are able to withdraw their savings; as men are often the primary bread winner, this has raised major concerns for long-term saving and retirement plans for families. Economic response measures that do not consider the gender dynamics of business, employment, and saving will therefore continue to reach more men than women, reinforcing gender inequality and not meeting the financial needs of women who have lost their livelihoods.

▪ **Example of national support: Fiji Stimulus Package and the National Budget 2020–2021**

The Fiji Government's COVID-19 Economic Stimulus Package and National Budget 2020–2021 includes limited analysis to show that women and men's different interests, responsibilities, and needs have been accounted for. This lack of gender analysis in economic response planning and implementation is recognised by Fiji's CSO Alliance for COVID-19 Humanitarian Response.⁶¹ For example, the stimulus package contains: only one women-specific initiative for entrepreneurs; makes no mention of women and men's different roles and needs; and lacks reference to how women and men may benefit differently from particular initiatives – such as changes in FNPF rules, tax breaks, temporary utility cost reductions, debt forgiveness, special financial measures, and one-off payments to specific population groups (including informal workers, people with disabilities, some pensioner groups, and persons living in poverty).

In order to counter the huge drop in employment brought about by the closure of international tourism, the Fiji Government has directed funding to supporting workers who have become unemployed or those facing reduced hours to alleviate immediate drops in income (they will continue to receive FJD220 and FJD44 per fortnight respectively).⁶² While this benefit will accrue to those working in the formal sectors, it will miss the majority of women workers operating in the informal sector; 64 per cent of women now informal-sector jobs and women make up little more than one-third (35 per cent) of the tourism workforce.⁶³

Furthermore, changes in FNPF rules will have uneven and unequal benefits as social insurance schemes reach more men than women; the FNPF pension plan includes 26 per cent female recipients and 74 per cent male recipients.⁶⁴ Social insurance expenditure on female beneficiaries overall, is already much lower than for men (see Box 2 above).

The only women-specific initiative in the Stimulus Package is targeted at women entrepreneurs and requires government to guarantee 75 per cent of outstanding principal on loans, up to a limit of FJD75,000 as well as loans in the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sector. While the initiative positively recognises the major role of women entrepreneurs, it does not account for the fact that only 19 per cent of businesses in Fiji are registered to women, and the majority of women's business activities remain in the informal sector.⁶⁵ A second positive measure is a disability inclusion incentive for employers including tax deduction for employees with disabilities working for three consecutive years, will increase from 300 per cent to 400 per cent.

Much of Fiji's Stimulus Package has focused on support to businesses, in the form of loan suspension, lowering of import or customs duties and Fiji's biggest-ever tax cut.⁶⁶ Many of these measures are aimed at restarting the tourism industry and new manufacturing and assembly industries (measures include the establishment of a Special Economic Zone).



Message 5 Sector targeting

The gender dynamics of different industries are a major consideration in analysing how women and men may be positively and negatively affected by economic initiatives. The choice of industries which governments choose to target with economic stimulus measures has gendered implications as women’s and men’s ability to participate in, and benefit from, different sectors is varied.

Targeting the sectors in which women work is important to ensure supportive measures and financial assistance reach and benefit women and their families. Because many women work in the informal sector the scale of their contribution to, and reliance on, particular industries may remain unquantified and unrecognised. For example, tourism is not recognised as a major industry in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (at 2.3 per cent of GDP) and economic response concerns have focused on the country’s fisheries industry given its higher contribution to GDP.⁶⁷ However, the tourism industry, unlike the fisheries industry, employs mainly all women. Therefore, the loss of tourism in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, while not necessarily a major loss for GDP, is a major loss for many women’s livelihoods. Similarly, in Tuvalu, women who made up the majority of employees and operators in the small tourism industry, have now shifted to working in cafes and restaurants where income is reportedly substantially smaller.⁶⁸ In the context of a very low employment rate among women, women in the informal tourism industry should be prioritised in gender-responsive economic planning and budgetary assistance.⁶⁹

In many countries, there has been an increase in funding allocation to construction, infrastructure, and roads. For example, in Fiji, the 2020–21 National Budget increased funding allocated to the construction and roads industry from FJD276 in the COVID-19 Package to FJD349 million in the 2020–21 Budget, an increase of FJD73 million. The construction and roads industries are a male-dominated industry, typically employing male workers due to opportunities for employment in roles that are considered typically “masculine”.^{70 71} Women may be secondary beneficiaries as financial dependents of men working in construction. Economic stimulus through infrastructure spending increases men’s opportunity for employment and income with fewer direct opportunities for women. It is critical that economic measures target more sectors in which women work as well as prioritise the safety of women and girls.

Infrastructure projects, along with extractive industries such as mining and forestry (closely linked to construction), also see the movement of workers to worksites and this can create risks for local women and girls. Previous examples from across the Pacific have demonstrated the risk to women and girls of expanding the construction and extractives industries, particularly in the context of limited economic opportunities for women and girls. In Solomon Islands and other countries, remote worksites and “worker’s camps” have increased the risk to women and girls of sexual assault, early or forced marriage, and other forms of sexual exploitation.⁷²

Box 4: ‘Gender-neutral’ economic measures

Seemingly gender-neutral economic measures such as tax cuts can **have major gendered impacts**. For example, the Fiji National Budget contained a number of special measures aimed at boosting the tourism industry. One of these was the reduction in import duties for alcohol, a measure aimed at boosting the ‘Love Our Locals Fiji’ domestic tourism campaign and lowering costs for tourism operators. However, this reduction has lowered the cost of alcohol for the wider community at a time when there is widespread economic hardship and job loss.

Women’s rights organisations have highlighted the resulting risk of a rise in men’s alcohol-related violence against women and children.⁷³

Rural women leaders have also highlighted that money is being spent by men on alcohol while women struggle to obtain from supermarkets that have increased prices.⁷⁴



The reduction of duties on imported food items, aimed at benefitting the tourism industry, could compete directly with domestically produced foods informally produced and sold in markets and roadside stalls. Women are already the majority of vendors in Pacific markets, however, many more women have turned to selling produce and prepared food in response to widespread job and income loss.⁷⁵ Cheaper imported foods could potentially reduce demand for women's domestically produced food.

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