

Enabling pregnant teenagers to complete their schooling

Tuvalu Enhancing Agency

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Project Name: Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser

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The policy at Tuvalu's only public high school is that pregnant girls are to be expelled. Efforts are underway to find culturally sensitive ways to work with schools, communities and pregnant girls to ensure these girls do not miss out on the opportunity for an education.

In a small island state like Tuvalu, there are limited learning opportunities. The school's policy to expel pregnant students means that these girls have almost no chance of finishing high school.

The high school's strict policy is grounded in a cultural view of looking at pregnant students as mischievous girls who can influence other girls. To challenge this perception, the Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser to the Government of Tuvalu, Ms Natalie Makhoul, and her colleagues from the Tuvalu Gender Affairs Department, Ms Pasai Falasa and Ms Lupe Tavita, supported the Education Department to develop an information package on teenage pregnancies and the link to gender equality. The information package was delivered as part of a public awareness campaign by education officers on eight islands.



Representatives from the Gender Affairs Department were invited to present at an Education Department Planning workshop, on gender cross-cutting issues and social inclusion. Photo credit: Tuvalu Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

Ms Makhoul also assisted with the development of human rights guidelines to be adopted as school rules. The Education Department is now leading this project and is also working on drafting a child protection policy and bill.

The common Tuvaluan response to pregnant schoolgirls is to question how the community can accept pregnant girls going back to school if this is not acceptable under culture and tradition. Ms Makhoul responds to these concerns as follows:

‘Culture and traditions are good and needed for a society to define moral values. However, there are some cases where cultural norms can have negative impacts on individuals. In this case, cultural norms would terminate a person’s education. If the girl cannot continue school, then she won’t have any chances to get a degree and continue tertiary education. This girl will be disadvantaged and has less access to jobs to support herself and her child. It will affect her whole life and the life of her child. Cultural norms should not

disadvantage people, in particular not if this girl is still a child herself. In this case, the well-being of an individual should count more than cultural norms. Cultural norms are not set in stone and can change with the time.'

The Education Department is optimistic it will be able to provide pregnant students with alternative options to continue their education in the near future. It will be a step closer to breaking the stigma experienced by pregnant girls in Tuvalu.

The Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser sits within the Gender Affairs Division of the Office of the Prime Minister in Tuvalu and provides capacity building and technical assistance to support efforts to advance gender equality and social inclusion in Tuvalu. Ms Makhoul works to foster partnerships with civil society organisations to work collaboratively, provided technical advice on gender mainstreaming and supports inclusive policy development.

*This Story of Change was originally published in the [Pacific Women Annual Progress Report 2016 – 2017](#). All values are consistent with that reporting period. For the most up-to-date value of activities, visit our [interactive map](#).