

Thematic Brief | Myths about gender equality in the Pacific

This Thematic Brief provides a broad summary of information and analysis about common gender equality myths in the Pacific and their underlying issues. The summary includes references to associated research and information.

This is one in a series of Thematic Briefs released by the Pacific Women Lead (PWL) at the Pacific Community (SPC) programme, termed PWL at SPC. The briefs have been updated to include COVID-19 considerations and recent programme information, based on the original briefs developed by the former programme, Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (Pacific Women).

The PWL at SPC programme has more than AUD55 million dedicated to its work under the Australian Government's AUD170 million PWL portfolio. This partnership with the Australian Government commits SPC to deliver the PWL at SPC programme as the cornerstone of the portfolio.

One of the largest global commitments to gender equality, PWL aims to promote women's leadership, realise women's rights, and increase the effectiveness of regional gender equality efforts. Among PWL's four delivery partners, SPC is the key implementing partner. Other central partners include the AIR (Amplify – Invest – Reach) partnership of women's funds, as well as various civil society organisations and coalitions. In addition, PWL Enabling Services (PWLES) deliver monitoring, evaluation and other services, along with the Australian Government's development partners for regional programmes, such as the United Nations (UN) and International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF).

Seven common myths

Seven common myths about gender equality in the Pacific are outlined below. These myths often proliferate during a crisis, such as a natural disaster or the COVID-19 pandemic, and inspire the work of the PWL at SPC programme and its partners to change harmful social norms and practices.

1. Gender equality is a Western concept and has no place within Pacific culture.
2. Many Pacific women have high social standing through their traditional social and cultural roles.
3. Religious teachings justify gender inequality.
4. Women and girls are more at risk of sexual violence from strangers than from people they know.
5. Violence in the home is a private issue.
6. Nowadays, bride price is a simple and uncomplicated traditional practice.
7. Sexual assault or violence against women is caused by women's personal behaviour.

Myth 1: Gender equality is a Western concept and has no place within Pacific culture.

Response

Pacific culture is often depicted as unchanging and something which needs to be preserved or defended to ensure its survival into the future. Some argue that social change (particularly changes in women's and men's roles and positions in society) will damage 'the Pacific way of life'. In reality, Pacific Island cultures are diverse, do not bear generalisation, and have continuously adapted to emerging social, economic and environmental factors. Further, Pacific Island cultures – like all cultures – will continue to adapt and change, because culture is not static;¹ changes are regularly and organically integrated into cultures, often without detection.

The evidence

Colonialism and religion have changed Pacific cultures significantly. It has been suggested that colonial administrators and missionaries may have promoted the idea that women's roles were primarily in the domestic and private sphere.² However, across the Pacific region, women had always been involved in productive activity through natural resource management, agriculture, handicraft production and trading. In several Pacific countries, moreover, women have held, and continue to hold, chiefly titles and play a variety of leadership roles in their communities and economies.

Urbanisation and the expanded reach of worldwide media influence cultural change in the Pacific, and globally. They also affect economic and social relations between women and men in families and workplaces.³ Other drivers of change include shifting political contexts and globalisation.⁴

If a person shifts away from traditional social safety nets and local cultural norms, they are exposed to alternatives and may seek to take advantage of new opportunities. This can challenge gender dynamics in families, threaten male/female power balances and lead to resistance against the advancement of women. In some cases, women's rights and freedoms are seen as threats to culture, to male dominance in decision-making, and to family security.

To analyse issues and dismantle myths, it is important to reinforce that women, men and children all contribute to the maintenance and evolution of culture and that gender equality can have a positive influence on this process. Pacific women have long promoted cultural preservation within the framework of human rights by integrating questions about positive cultural change into discussions of gender equality. These questions include: what cultural values are brought forward, for whom, and who benefits?⁵

Increasing numbers of men and women have been advocating for gender equality and transformative change at local, national and regional levels. Across the region, Pacific women and men are speaking out about the need to preserve certain cultural practices, which they cherish, and to eliminate or change those that discriminate against women. To support Pacific advocates and to advance international and regional commitments, PWL aims to promote gender equality in the context of both diverse cultural contexts in the region and the human rights frameworks endorsed by Pacific governments.

'Our cultures are changing and they are changing in favour of men. This has further marginalised women because there is this expectation by men that we still play our expected traditional roles while they move on.'

Ume Wainette, National Coordinator, Papua New Guinea Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee⁶

Myth 2: Many Pacific women have high social standing through their traditional social and cultural roles

Response

In some Pacific Island countries, women hold high socio-cultural standing linked to family status or matrilineal cultural structures. They are a minority in the Pacific, which is a highly diverse region where not all women experience cultural privilege. In many cultures in the region, women have limited opportunities and low social status. Regardless of inherited social status, many Pacific women from diverse backgrounds are choosing to shift from traditional domestic roles and informal sector employment to the workplace and decision-making positions previously dominated by men.

The evidence

Globalisation, rising costs of living, rural-to-urban migration, women's activism, more equitable educational opportunities and changing gender equality dynamics are some of the reasons for women's increased participation in decision-making and economic activities.

National governments and development partners are increasing support for women interested in alternative forms of employment. In Solomon Islands, the Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative is piloting a training project for women to become solar technicians and entrepreneurs.⁷ Regionally, UN Women and non-governmental organisations support women to link leadership skills with economic empowerment, in many cases building on traditional activities and skills.⁸

Women are also entering non-traditional employment sectors and advancing into leadership positions in the private and public sectors. While the numbers of women in the police and military are small, they are increasing in some countries.⁹ In the private sector, efforts are being made to change attitudes about women in leadership and to recognise the contributions they make to business success.¹⁰ The inaugural Pacific Export Survey 2016 revealed that around one quarter of registered exporting companies in the Pacific have a female proprietor or Chief Executive Officer.¹¹ In Fiji, the Fiji Association of Women Graduates raises funds to support women and girls wishing to undertake study in fields where women are underrepresented.¹²

During a crisis period, such as a cyclone or the COVID-19 pandemic, women's livelihoods are disproportionately affected and they are more likely to experience unemployment and economic insecurity. Women overall earn less than men and are more likely to work in low-paying, informal and precarious work. Women in the Pacific are therefore particularly vulnerable to the impacts of a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and responses need to be gender-inclusive, ensuring the active engagement of women in crisis-response leadership roles.¹³

Myth 3: Religious teachings justify gender inequality.

Response

Pacific Island countries are deeply religious, with Christianity practised by the majority. However, some religious groups use their interpretations of scripture to perpetuate gender stereotypes and inequality. This may be, in part, because the leadership within churches and religious groups has been traditionally dominated by men, who bring their own gendered cultural beliefs to the



interpretation of Christianity. Faith leaders have immense influence over communities and can shape beliefs about gender relations.¹⁴

The evidence

Religious texts are subject to interpretation and faith, which is not homogenous. Even within religions, there are different denominations and, thus, different ways to practice the same religion. Given faith plays such a significant role in Pacific life, it is important to use gender analysis to gauge how religious teachings impact the lives of women and men, girls and boys.¹⁵

‘The system that I grew up in and the knowledge that was given to me by my parents and the leaders of the church was different – it was that women are inferior to men. It is very important to correct this understanding because women and men are same in the eyes of God... The interpretation of the Bible is so important because it can do good but also harm people if not done correctly.’

Ms Sosefo Tigarea, the Women's Program Coordinator at the Pacific Theological College¹⁶

In some instances, religious texts are being misused to justify the oppression of women. The Bible, for example, makes many references to the important role women played in biblical times and includes verses that highlight that all are equal before God. However, to control women's behaviour and justify this as God's will, there are some people who do not cite these portions of the Bible and only focus on the ones that suit their view.¹⁷

As interpretations of the Bible can create obstacles to gender equality, PWL supports programmes addressing gender issues in the context of faith, such as having faith leaders challenge beliefs linked to gender inequality by analysing the intended meanings of religious language and teachings, helping people to understand the context in which the words were written and the processes through which they have been handed down.¹⁸

Myth 4: Women and girls are more at risk of sexual violence from strangers than from people they know.

Response

Discriminatory social norms can reinforce perceptions that women and girls are most at risk of sexual violence from people they know only minimally or who they do not know at all.¹⁹ However, evidence shows that the vast majority of perpetrators are well known to their victims, with most being husbands, intimate partners, male relatives or family friends.

The evidence

Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are among countries with the highest lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence in the world. They have rates at nearly twice the global average of 35 per cent.²⁰ For countries that have undertaken prevalence studies (Fiji,²¹ Kiribati,²² Samoa,²³ Solomon Islands,²⁴ Tonga²⁵ and Vanuatu²⁶), the lifetime prevalence rates for physical and sexual violence by partners and non-partners among Pacific Island women ranges from 60 to 80 per cent.²⁷

In Fiji, 64 per cent of women who have ever been in an intimate relationship experienced physical and/or sexual violence or both by a husband or intimate partner. The prevalence of non-partner physical and/or sexual violence in Fiji is 31 per cent, with the majority of perpetrators known to the victim, often male family members or friends and teachers.²⁸ This pattern exists across many Pacific Island countries who have undertaken similar in-depth surveys.²⁹

The ultimate goal of any action to end violence against all women and girls is to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. Central to preventing violence is changing community attitudes that portray violence against women and girls as acceptable or as a private matter.³⁰ Traditional leaders (including faith leaders) need to demonstrate strong commitment and active involvement in community-based initiatives and mobilisation to end all violence against all women and girls, including within families.³¹

Community attitudes toward persons with disabilities need to be challenged by raising awareness of their human rights. Women with disabilities are highly vulnerable to abuse from families and caregivers.³² Most Pacific Island countries have now either signed or ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), noting Article 16 of the UNCRPD, which guarantees freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse, and enshrines the right to a life free of violence.³³

Myth 5: Violence in the home is a private issue.

Response

Domestic violence is defined as occurring in the private sphere (or home setting) and is usually between family members or those in an intimate relationship. While domestic violence is often seen as a private matter in almost all Pacific Island countries, it is a specific crime punishable by law and needs the collective action of everyone (family, community, government) to end it.^{34 35}

In all countries, domestic violence causes harm to women, children and communities. It is a violation of human rights, causes substantial economic losses to governments and employers and is contrary to wide regional commitments to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The evidence

At their 2009 meeting, Pacific Islands Forum leaders defined sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a risk to human security and a destabilising factor for communities and societies alike. Leaders urged wider recognition of the high prevalence of SGBV in the Pacific and, in particular, in the domestic context and in conflict and post-conflict situations. This led to the establishment of the Forum Reference Group to Address SGBV.³⁶

As early as 1982, the Papua New Guinea Law Reform Commission reported on the high incidence of domestic violence in Papua New Guinea. After extensive nationwide research and consultations, the Law Reform Commission concluded that domestic violence is a complex social problem which has harmful effects on the victims, as well as on the family, community and entire society and, therefore, is a public, not private matter.³⁷

Every Pacific Island country has made political commitments to end violence against women, and there is recognition that violence against women is a national development issue that must be addressed by national collaborative action.

Community awareness is essential to address SGBV, as is access to fair functional justice systems that allow women to report these crimes and seek protection. It is especially important that police systematically implement domestic violence laws and strictly enforce related protection mechanisms in order for women to feel supported and safe when they report domestic violence.³⁸

Domestic violence manifests in many forms, including physical violence, sexual abuse, property damage, emotional and psychological abuse, intimidation, harassment, stalking, economic deprivation or threats of any of the above.³⁹

This is especially important to understand when addressing impacts on children. Children who live with domestic violence not only endure the distress of being surrounded by violence but are more likely to become victims of abuse themselves.⁴⁰ Even when children are not physically abused themselves, their exposure to domestic violence can have severe and lasting effects. Studies have shown that younger children are more likely to be exposed to domestic violence than older children, which can impair their mental and emotional growth in a critical stage of development.⁴¹

Myth 6: Nowadays, bride price is a simple and uncomplicated traditional practice.

Response

There are many interpretations of bride price and its role in traditional cultures. It has traditionally entailed the exchange of goods, such as pigs, shell-money, pandanus mats or *tapa* cloths, from the family of the groom to the family of the bride. Nowadays, it is increasingly paid in cash or commercial goods, rather than cultural artefacts that have high traditional value.

There are many views about the way this traditional practice is implemented in modern society. Proponents of the practice argue that bride price is misnamed and is a more complex representation of commitment and joining between the two parties (families and clans) and represents the significant economic contribution of women's productive work.⁴² Alternatively, some indigenous women suggest that, today, it is indeed a 'price' and understood by some to be a licence for a man's violent control over his wife.⁴³ Pacific gender equality experts and the UN CEDAW Committee argue that the bride price system is discriminatory and misuses culture and custom to justify mistreatment of women to suit community or family convenience and financial needs.⁴⁴

'He will say he's paid bride-price so that gives him the right to hit her. The chief and the family will agree with this. They will say that 'You are his property'.

Vanuatu, Violence Against Women in Melanesia and East Timor (2008)⁴⁵

The evidence

Bride price is a traditional practice. It exists in many regions of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu where increasingly it is paid in cash or commercial goods, rather than cultural artefacts like shell-money and pandanus mats that have high traditional value. The amounts paid are vastly increasing in response to shifts in wealth and power of the women's ethnic group or region.⁴⁶

There is a rising awareness about the changes in practice regarding marriage and bride price over the years, and that exchanges of cash rather than traditional artefacts may result in traditional checks and protections not being in place, which can make girls and women vulnerable.⁴⁷ The practice can result in adolescent girls and women who are unhappily married, staying married



because leaving would require them to return the bride price and often the woman's family have already spent (or exchanged) the money and goods. This means returning the price, even if the family were willing to do so, would typically not be a viable option.

Myth 7: Sexual assault or violence against women is caused by women's personal behaviour.

Response

What a woman wears, the company she keeps, or her movements, sexual history or alcohol consumption are examples of reasons commonly cited to lay blame unfairly on the victim of violence.

Victim-blaming is the result of exposure to pervasive social norms that discriminate against women and girls and normalise both violence against women and aggressive sexual behaviours by men. This has resulted in some people believing that women can – and have the responsibility to – behave in ways that will not encourage sexual assault.⁴⁸

Blaming the victim protects the perpetrator of the crime and makes it more difficult for justice to be served. Victim-blaming attitudes can exist within families, communities, governments, the police, courts and across the media. Many victims fear being blamed and shamed for a crime committed against them, hindering many victims from reporting cases to the police.⁴⁹

'To bring about any change, you have to have a total change in mindset, attitudes and thinking, and cultural change. You can have the best of laws, but if the people who are implementing those laws, if they don't get it then I'm sorry, we're not able to make a deeper stand in eliminating violence against women.'

Shamima Ali, Coordinator, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre⁵⁰

The evidence

Gender-based victim-blaming is a reflection of discriminatory social norms. In 2014, women's rights groups in Fiji strongly denounced comments made by a government minister associating sexual harassment and assault with women's clothing and behaviour.⁵¹ While the comments were later claimed to be distorted by the media, the debate elicited important discussions around victim-blaming. It highlighted how victim-blaming shames and further violates the already victimised individual rather than denouncing the aggressive actions of assailants or harassers and, similarly, insults men by assuming that all men are violent or sexual deviants who cannot control their sexual urges and will assault women who are not dressed modestly.

To address this issue, community awareness and discussion are essential. Members of the public need to understand that only the perpetrator is responsible for the crime and never the victim. Whether the violence takes place in the home or outside and whether it is physical, sexual, emotional or otherwise, the victim's behaviour should never be used as a defence to justify violence.⁵² It is important to ensure that the justice system treats all violence against women as a criminal act. This could mean reforming and strengthening laws and ensuring comprehensive awareness and education of all parties, including police, lawyers, courts and the public.

It is also critical to support women’s rights advocacy organisations since global evidence shows that countries with effective gender equality activist coalitions are more likely to have laws that protect women from this kind of violence.⁵³

What can be done?

The common myth that gender equality is a Western or foreign concept that does not belong in the Pacific is being challenged at all levels. Pacific women and men are advocating for gender equality and transformative change within the context of their own cultures.

Analysis of culture and gender relations in the Pacific must distinguish how culture is being defined. This includes looking at whose culture it is (men’s and/or women’s) and the extent to which – and for whose benefit – representatives of a nation, ethnic group or social entity are defining, interpreting and promoting specific cultural beliefs or practices.⁵⁴ To address ways that religion may sanction gender inequality, work is being done by faith-based groups who are creating dialogue with faith leaders to look deeply into the values they associate with their faith and its texts and to re-interpret texts through a gender-inclusive lens. These approaches emphasise the faith-based values to honour all individuals.⁵⁵

In addition to addressing the myths that women and girls are more at risk of sexual violence from strangers than people they know, and that violence in the home is a private issue, violence must be prevented from occurring in the first place. Central to preventing violence is changing community attitudes that portray acceptance of violence against women and girls or that view such violence as a private matter. Traditional leaders, including faith leaders, are increasingly active in initiatives to prevent violence against all women and girls.⁵⁶ This includes challenging discriminatory attitudes about people with disabilities and raising awareness of their human rights.

It is critical to raise awareness that perpetrators are responsible for their crime and to eliminate victim-blaming. It is equally important to ensure that the justice system is accessible to all women and treats all incidents of violence against women as crimes. Strengthening legislation and raising awareness of police, lawyers, court staff and the public will support the women’s movement and political leaders who are pushing for more comprehensive implementation of laws to end violence against women and girls and eliminate harmful traditional practices.

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