



Economic Status of Women in the Pacific

Research Note - August 2011

KEY FINDINGS

- In 2010 the Pacific region lost 65 percent in potential human development due to gender inequality. But this average hides considerable regional differences.
- PNG and Solomon Islands have high gender inequality, but perhaps surprisingly, so do FSM and Nauru.
- Polynesia averages the same as high human development nations, with an average loss of 57 percent in potential human development due to gender inequality.
- Cook Islands, Niue and Fiji have the least gender inequality of the Pacific region.
- Gender inequality in the Solomon Islands appears to have increased considerably due to the ethnic conflict limiting women's participation in the work force and access to education.
- High maternal mortality rates correlate with a lower percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel. However, Samoa and Tonga have high maternal mortality rates despite nearly 100 percent of births attended by skilled health professionals.
- In Melanesia, PNG has the worst female to male education rates (12 percent to 24 percent), followed by the Solomon Islands (32 percent to 38 percent).
- High fertility rates across the Pacific suggest an essentially reproductive role for women, which limit economic and political participation.
- In developed countries, life expectancy for women is 5 to 10 years higher than men. Most Pacific nations fall below this norm, but especially PNG and Solomon Islands (+1 year).

MEASURING GENDER INEQUALITY

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) provides a unique and robust estimate of the loss in potential human development due to gender disparities across the Pacific. Ranging from zero, which indicates that women and men fare equally, to 100 percent, which indicates women fare as poorly as possible, the measurement of GII reflects inequality between female and male achievements in three dimensions:

- (1) Reproductive Health;
- (2) Empowerment; and
- (3) Participation in Labour Markets.

While the GII does not capture all participation in the informal economy, nor the reproductive work done at household level that impacts women's ability to participate in economic work outside the house, GII calculations show that by international standards, women in the Pacific still face significant inequality, which for most countries is a major dampener on human development. Until these significant gender gaps are closed we can't expect these countries to experience significant and sustainable development, especially where these gaps mean that girls remain uneducated, and women's health and economic outcomes are poor.

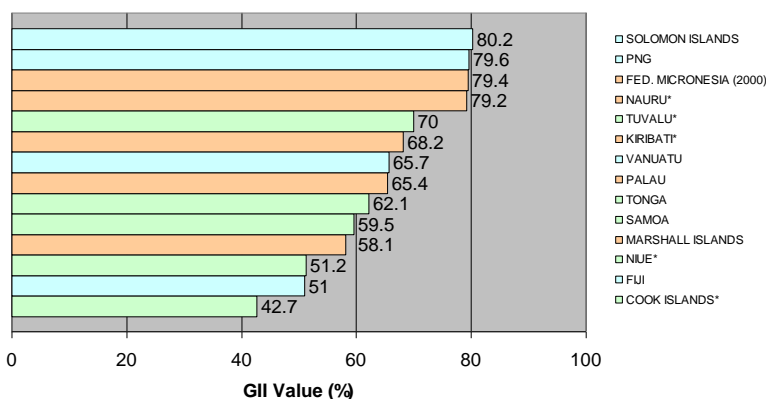
Melanesia Trends:

Although Melanesia's average loss in potential human development due to gender inequality is 69 percent, it has the largest disparity between countries than any other region. Alarming high gender inequality in the Solomon Islands (80 percent) and PNG (79 percent) is a result of large disparities in educational attainment, political representation of women and men and in PNG, high maternal mortality rates. While Fiji (51 percent) maintains the regions smallest loss due to gender inequality, further analysis is needed into what is driving this low percentage compared with other Melanesian countries.

Polynesia Trends:

The Cook Islands (43 percent) has the lowest gender inequality of the Pacific region, excelling in most dimensions and well above the average of high human development nations (57 percent). Overall, Polynesia's regional average is identical to that of high human development nations (2008), however all other Polynesian

Figure 1: Loss in Potential Human Development due to Gender Inequality (2010)



countries, experience a loss due to gender inequality of between 51 percent (Niue) to 70 percent (Tuvalu). The largest gender disparities occurring due to unequal labour force participation and poor political representation of women in high level government.

Micronesia Trends:

Nauru and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) are amongst Pacific nations with the highest gender inequality which brings the Micronesian average loss in potential human development up to 70 percent. With high maternal mortality, adolescent fertility, and low female political participation, these countries only perform well in women's educational attainment compared to men. All other Micronesian countries experience similar GII values to one another, between 58 percent (Marshall Islands) and 68 percent (Kiribati).

ANALYSIS OF GENDER INEQUALITY DIMENSIONS

The GII reflects women's disadvantage in three dimensions:

1. **Reproductive health** based on the maternal mortality rate and adolescent fertility rate.

- **Average maternal mortality rates (deaths per 100,000 births) for Melanesia (259), Polynesia (55) and Micronesia (95) mask an appallingly high risk of death at childbirth across the Pacific.** This reflects the low priority put on the well being of women during childbirth, and is a clear signal of women being marginalised in the wider society. In PNG, the risk of death during childbirth is exceptionally high by world standards, with a maternal mortality rate of 733, followed by Kiribati (250) and Vanuatu (178). There is a direct correlation of poor maternal mortality rates with a lower percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel, PNG (53 percent), Kiribati (63 percent) and Vanuatu (74 percent).
- **In developed countries (2009), 19 teenage girls in every 1000 have given birth, while across the Pacific, the adolescent fertility rate is 44.** This high rate of premature pregnancy and motherhood pose considerable health, economic and social risks to teenage girls, preventing them from achieving a higher level of education, and often destines them to a low skilled job at best.

2. **Empowerment** based on education attainment and share of female seats in parliament.

- **Although women in Micronesia (88 percent) and Polynesia (83 percent) have high regional averages of at least secondary education (combined gross secondary and tertiary enrolment rates) compared to their male counterparts, this masks poor female educational attainment in Melanesia (45 percent).** Women's access to good quality education is a key determinant of their success in the formal economy. Educated women are more likely to enjoy satisfying work, use their voices in public debate, and be able to care for their own health and that of their family. PNG has the regions most appalling female to male education rates (12 percent to 24 percent), followed by Solomon Islands (31 percent to 38 percent).
- **Women in the Pacific maintain an average of five percent of seats in parliament, which masks significant disparities across the region.** This percentage of seats held by women reflects women's poor visibility in political leadership at a national level and in society more generally. It is important to note that high fertility rates in PNG (4.4), Tonga (4.2), Vanuatu (4.1), Marshall Islands (4.4), Tuvalu (3.7) and Kiribati (3.5) directly correlate with very poor female political representation of less than four percent of seats in national parliament held by women.

3. **Participation in Labour Markets** based on female and male labour force participation rates.

- **Average female labour force participation rates are significantly lower than men in Micronesia (57 percent to 71 percent), Melanesia (53 percent to 73 percent) and Polynesia (46 percent to 75 percent).** While some women choose not to participate in the formal labour market, drop out to undertake unpaid family care responsibilities, or are only active in the informal economy, these relative labour force participation rates can be taken to reflect the relative degree of economic activity of women to men.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Promoting gender equality and empowering women is an overarching goal of Australia's aid program, and if the agency intends to increase its efforts to meet gender equality goals and targets in the Pacific, the following needs to be considered:

- **The GII should continue to be calculated annually to monitor progress towards gender equality in the Pacific, based on the available data.**
- **While not a first preference, anecdotal evidence can and should be used to monitor and analyse crucial elements of women's reproductive health, empowerment and economic opportunities across the Pacific.**

