




Social protection and gender – a life-cycle approach

Mainstreaming gender through social protection requires assessing the experiences of poverty and vulnerability faced by both women and men. This briefing paper argues that social protection can strengthen gender equality beyond merely targeting women. Gender relations in Pacific Island Countries (PICs) are embedded in traditional socio-cultural norms but are affected by rapid economic and social changes. Gender inequality and discrimination in the Pacific can cause significant social harm and can hinder economic progress, including failing to break the intergenerational transfer of poverty. Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment is of benefit to broader economic and development goals.

Rising domestic violence in PICs has become a critical concern for women of all ages. For example 64 per cent of women in the Solomon Islands report experiencing partner violence, and in Fiji two-thirds of married women report being hit by their partner. In more than 95 per cent of domestic assaults in the Pacific region, the husband is the aggressor, but violence is not limited to partners. In Kiribati, 11 per cent of women aged 15 to 48 years experienced physical violence by other family members, in particular a father or stepfather. Other disadvantages experienced by women compared to men include poor access to maternal health services, lower labour force participation – especially in the formal economy – neglect of elderly women, and higher poverty rates in women headed households.

The sources and drivers of rising gender inequality are multiple and often overlapping. They include traditional beliefs and practices, poverty, migration, urbanisation, globalisation, and poor governance. Across the Pacific, most communities are governed by patriarchal norms: elder men are the decision makers, women move into their husband's household, there is a strict division of labour between females and males in the household and community, and inheritance largely passes through male lineages. Migration (especially overseas) is predominantly male with women left behind experiencing increased burdens of care and family provisioning; women who migrate to urban areas are prone to exclusion from their communities and a heightened risk of violence. While across PICs many governments have committed to international codes designed to reduce discrimination based on gender and age, these are often weakly or negligibly applied in practice, and there are significant gaps in family law – and its implementation – to protect women against violence in most countries. A notable exception is the recently legislated Family Protection Act in Vanuatu.

In summary, addressing gender inequality through social protection requires assessing the differential experiences of poverty and vulnerability faced by women and men. Within the range of interventions in the Pacific, gender inequality and women's empowerment are



explicit objectives only in family welfare support programs, which assist single women (widows) and single mothers based on their poverty and vulnerability. Limited access to child support and child maintenance is a growing concern given the rising incidence of family separation and poverty. Overall, new social protection initiatives in the Pacific need to be acutely aware of the gendered outcomes of the support they provide, and to ensure that they prevent or reverse declines in women's social and economic circumstances.