

## Women's Education: Pacific Overview 1994

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Ensuring that the education of women and girls is on national agenda is a high priority issue in all Pacific countries, whether we are arguing from the viewpoint of human resource development or equity for women. The difference today is that this push is now supported by data - it is no longer based on unverified assumptions about how many women are getting/not getting into schools and how these women are progressing through the system. Women are appreciating the importance of data in this increasingly data-proof society: they are asking for existing information to be desegregated by gender and questioning the validity of the assumptions on which much of this data is based, and collecting new data based on new questions as well. Data baselines about women have been established in all regional countries, action plans featuring achievable targets have been identified from this information and appropriate monitoring and evaluation processes set in motion.

This paper describes the educational status of Pacific women and girls today.<sup>1</sup> There are great variations between countries as will be seen, and within countries as well, but this paper draws attention to general trends. The data, as always, must be treated with caution regarding its accuracy. Other points of note are that: increases in participation noted are proportional, and may not always be 'real' gains for women; participation does not equate with quality of education - shortages of experienced, trained teachers are the norm in the Pacific, particularly in science subjects, and many schools have very minimal resources; 'national' data masks urban/rural disparities in the provision and quality of education. For example, the secondary schools which prepare students for entry into tertiary institutions are located in urban areas, thus perpetuating inequity.

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<sup>1</sup> Largely based on the materials prepared by Heather Booth for UNSTAT 1993

## **The General Picture**

The extent of the task of educating Pacific women and girls is vividly demonstrated by regional illiteracy statistics (Table 1), which not only show that the rate of female illiteracy is extremely high, but that women's rates are markedly higher than those of males in most Pacific countries. For example, the illiteracy rate for Papua New Guinea women has been estimated to be in the range of 68-80 percent (Kajoi, 1993). This data confirms the large educational 'backlog' facing women, and at the same time confirms that males have received favoured treatment in the allocation of school places in these countries for some time.

Pacific 'quality of life' statistics also reinforce the crucial need for educational programmes. The region is marked by very high birth rates; alarming maternal mortality rates; an increasing incidence of malnutrition and nutrition-related diseases, particularly amongst women and children; and increasing disparity in wealth between families and by area. It is well documented that higher levels of education for women are associated with lower population growth rates, the improved health status of families, as well as increases in the economic development of the family, and of the community and nation.

### **Access**

Education is not free, universally available or compulsory in most Pacific countries. Governments do not have sufficient funds to provide schooling for rapidly growing school-age populations, but depend heavily on religious and donor agency assistance in this regard. As a result, there are large variations in the availability of school places and participation through the region. Generally speaking, enrolment figures for the Polynesian Pacific are markedly better than for parts of Melanesia and Micronesia. For example, fewer than half the citizens of PNG have had any formal education, only 24 percent of the 5-11 years population are at school, and 37.1 percent of 12-16 year olds (Cole, 1993). As will be seen, women's participation in formal schooling is markedly less than that of males in most of the countries of the region.

**Table 1. Illiteracy Rates, 1970, 1980, 1990  
(per 100)**

Country	Year	Male	Female
American Samoa	1970	-	-
	1980	3	3
	1990	0.4	0.14
Cook Is.	1966	3	3
	1986	3.8	4.0
Fiji	1966	21	34
	1976	16	26
	1986	9.8	15.8
French Polynesia	1971	3	3
Guam	1980	4	4
	1990	5.7	8.1
Kiribati	1978	4	6
	1990	5.7	8.1
Marshall Is.	1988	17.4	22.0
Nauru	1983	10	11
New Caledonia	1969	12	14
	1976	8	10
Northern Marianas	1980	3	4
	1990	0.7	1.1
Palau	1990	1.7	3.4
Papua New Guinea	1980	70	82
Samoa	1981	3	3
	1986	2.0	1.7
Solomon Is.	1991	73	83
Tonga	1991	3	1
Tuvalu	1976	5.7	-
	1991	0.9	1.1
Vanuatu	1979	43	52
	1989	32.2	40.2

Source: Data compiled by H Booth for UNSTAT (1993).

## Formal Schooling

Pacific women's participation in formal schooling is similar to that of women in developed nations: fewer women compared with males enter the formal school system; the attrition rate for women is higher than males, hence the higher the level, the lower the female participation; women are concentrated in social sciences as opposed to male predominance in basic sciences.

An increase and consolidation in *preschool* services is taking place throughout the region, and many governments are now supporting preschools. Total preschool enrolments, and enrolment by gender, are an area needing research. While the general pattern of formal schooling (Table 2) is 'the higher the level, the lower the female participation', the attrition point for females varies by country. For example, in Melanesian countries this is between the first and second level, whereas in countries such as Fiji, French Polynesia, Palau and Tonga, which have achieved almost equal male-female participation at the second level, the critical female attrition point occurs between secondary and tertiary level. American Samoa, the Cook Islands and the Northern Marianas are exceptions, female enrolment in tertiary study in these two countries exceeding that of males.

Ensuring that females enter *primary school* is the first critical hurdle for women in many countries, especially as research shows that females who gain access to Grade 1 are more likely to stay in school through to Grade 6. Girls' access to Grade 1 has improved considerably in Melanesian countries in recent years. For example, female enrolment in Grade 1 in PNG rose from 47.3% (1971) to 68.8% (1981) to an estimated 75.6% in 1986 (Tawaiyole and Weeks, 1988:26). Solomon Islands also shows improvements in the overall intake of female students at primary level (42% in 1981, 46% in 1990, falling relatively but not absolutely to 45% in 1991).

The second critical bottleneck for women is the transition between primary and *secondary schooling*. For example, female enrolment in secondary and higher education in PNG is roughly one third that of males; in Vanuatu, secondary enrolment figures have been calculated at 24% males and 21%

females; Solomon Islands has seen increases in female intake from 30% in 1980 to 36% in 1986 and in 1991 also. Some countries are moving towards gender equity at *higher secondary level*. In Form 6, 49% of Fijian students are females, and for the Indo-Fijian population, 51%. Western Samoa is one of the few Pacific countries where more females than males are enrolled in secondary school, at 69%, compared with 60% overall.

**Table 2. Enrolment at First, Second and University Equivalent Level.  
(Girls enrolled per 100 boys)**

Country	First Level		Second Level		University Equivalent	
	Year	Girls enrolled per 100 boys	Year	Girls enrolled per 100 boys	Year	Women enrolled per 100 men
American Samoa	1990	89	1990	93	1990	107
Cook Islands	1990	98	1990	89	1991	100
Fiji	1986	95	1986	100	1988	49
French Polynesia	1990	91	1990	113	1980	35
Guam	1990	95	1990	97	1990	93
Kiribati	1992	97	1992	109	1992	80
Marshall Is.	1991	92	1991	105	89/90	84
Micronesia Fed. States	1991	93	1991	88	-	-
Nauru	-	-	-	-	-	-
New Caledonia	1990	94	1989	108	1985	79
Northern Marianas Is.	1990	93	1990	111	1990	118
Palau	1990	89	1990	100	1990	65
Papua New Guinea	1990	80	1990	61	1986	21
Samoa	1989	92	1980	96	1983	97
Solomon Is.	1986	77	1986	60	-	-
Tonga	1990	92	1987	94	1985	29
Tuvalu	1992	93	1990	143	1991	64
Vanuatu	1990	89	1991	75	1991	29

Source: UNESCO Yearbook (1992) Paris.

H Booth, data compiled for UNSTAT (1993).

The availability of opportunities for in-country *tertiary* study is a crucial factor in women's participation when, as reported, many parents prefer not to send their daughters overseas to study. The different availability of in-country tertiary study opportunities, and the wide-ranging nature of these (as police force and nursing training, teachers' colleges and national institutions of higher education) make country comparisons difficult. However, a study from the Marshall Islands (Table 3) gives some indication of the situation. This shows a predominance of males at university and at the College of Micronesia, but not at lower tertiary institutions.

**Table 3: Scholarships by gender by type of institution**

**Marshall Islands (1988)**

Type of institution	Number		Percentage		Gender ratio <i>male:female</i>
	<i>m</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>f</i>	
University	31	10	26	16	76:24
College of Micronesia	56	17	46	27	77:23
Community Colleges	16	15	13	24	52:48
Other Colleges	13	18	11	30	42:58
Other	5	2	4	3	71:29
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>66:29</b>

Source: Booth (1989) *1988 Census* :9

*Extension courses* through the USP and UPNG provide another option for tertiary study. The Polynesian Pacific sector tended to have more females enrolled in extension study compared to males, with the converse being the norm for Melanesian countries. However, in recent years the enrolment of women students in the Melanesian countries of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu has increased significantly.

**Table 4: Enrolment by USP Centre, Year and Gender**

	1987 male	female	1990 male	female
Cook Islands	233	273	334	455
Fiji	2454	1318	4436	2856
Kiribati	354	258	516	426
Nauru	157	214	76	158
Solomon Islands	569	79	630	134
Tonga	565	435	562	363
Vanuatu	359	140	534	181
Western Samoa	252	261	272	274
<b>Total</b>	<b>4943</b>	<b>2978</b>	<b>7360</b>	<b>4847</b>

Source: USP University Extension, 1993.

Research is being carried out by University Extension (USP) on the barriers women face in undertaking study by the extension mode.

*Overseas scholarship* allocations have traditionally favoured males. However, positive steps by donor agencies, such as Australia's John Crawford Awards (initiated in 1989 as the Equity and Merit Scheme) are addressing this situation. This award sets a quota for women students; selects the scholars, (i.e. these are not selected by national governments); and gives careful consideration to older women applicants, on the grounds that women may enter a 'career' development field at a later age than men due to women's child raising responsibilities. As a result of measures such as these, more women are studying overseas in short and long term placements.

### **Adult education**

None of the regional governments has an adult education policy, but they do provide a limited number of health and agriculture services through government extension departments. As a result, NGOs have filled the urgent need for 'second chance' and in many cases 'first chance' education

for Pacific women for many years. The newly emerging national women's bureaus give high priority to educational programmes as well. Service organisations such as Girl Guides, Brownies, and Girl's Life Brigades also play an important role in teaching girls leadership and management skills, a role which has not been well recognised or supported.

The nature and extent of the NGO programmes has not been well evaluated or documented. However, four programme trends can be identified in the Pacific: a focus on women's family role initiated by religious organisations in the early contact era; government programmes directing health interventionist programmes to women (and agricultural extension activities to males); the WID 'development' projects of the 1970s and 1990s aimed at ensuring that women's concerns are included in the national agenda.

Many Pacific Women's NGOs have a long and successful history of running welfare programmes for women. However, many have experienced considerable difficulty in adopting a development focus in their programmes<sup>2</sup>. Reasons for this are many - for example, their predominantly voluntary staff may lack the content expertise needed to run such programmes and/or the educational and management expertise needed to present and sustain programmes.

The emergence of specialist NGOs is addressing this problem. These include, for example, groups such as Women's Rights, Women and Agriculture, Women and Business, and Women and Violence. Each of these specialist NGO groups is developing its own specific expertise, and most have educational wings which run programmes and distribute educational materials, often in the local languages. Many of these national groups are networking across the region. For example, three Solomon Island women who attended the Fiji Workshop on Violence (1992), have now run their own Domestic Violence Workshops in Solomon Islands and are producing their own local materials on this topic.

At the same time, national governments are starting to take responsibility for programmes previously regarded as NGO territory. For example, the

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<sup>2</sup> See Fairbairn-Dunlop P. (1990) 'Strengthening NGO Structures'.



Huli Women in Literacy programme (1980-1985) was conducted by three PNG mission agencies, (the United Church, Evangelical Church of Papua and the Christian Brethren Church). Seventy percent of the estimated 1736 literate adults who completed the programme during these years were female (Apelis 1986). Today, literacy is a high priority issue on the PNG Government programme. The National Women's Division, Ministry of Youth, Home Affairs and Religion are piloting a skill-based literacy programme for Women (Kajoi 1993).

### By Subject

Despite increases in the overall proportion of females enrolled at all levels, women are grossly under-represented in technical and vocational subjects. Tertiary study data from Western Samoa would probably be typical for the region.

**Table 5: Review of Australian sponsored training programmes  
Western Samoa (1980-1991)**

Field of study	Females n:73	Males n:116
Ag/Vet Science		7
Arts Humanities	37	21
Business/Economics	17	27
Computing	1	4
Education/Teaching	4	6
Engineering/Surveying	2	22
Health/Medicine	3	4
Law	3	2
Science/Maths	5	19
Technical/Vocational		4
Other	1	

Source: Review of the Australian Sponsored Training Programme for Western Samoa, (1992).

Slow inroads into the gender separation by curriculum are being made. For example, of the 18 Diplomas in Tropical Agriculture awarded at the first USP School of Agriculture graduation ceremony (1977), five were to Western Samoan women. When suitable accommodation for women was provided at that campus, the enrolment of regional women immediately increased, and recent gender quota systems are further boosting the number of women students. In 1993 there were 17 women students at the SOA, 12 in the degree programme and 5 diploma students. Two women have been accepted into the masters programme for 1995. The opening of a new hostel for women at the Fiji College of Agriculture (1993) is also encouraging the enrolment of women students there.

Much groundwork is needed to identify the reasons for women's low rate of participation in science-related courses. For example, is it that women do not have sufficient or appropriate entry qualifications for these? It is very clear that issues such as these will require long term measures, such as making sure that primary and secondary school women students receive a sound science and mathematics education so that their future career prospects are not jeopardised.

The regional body responsible for training women community officers (the Community Education Training College (CETC) has had varied success in its efforts to broaden its programme away from an overwhelmingly home science orientation. A curriculum review (1980) proposed the inclusion of economics and income-generation programmes and a second curriculum review is presently under way.

Governments are trying to address this issue by targeting women in mainstream development projects. For example, PNG is piloting a Women in Fisheries project which is based at the Fisheries Department and shares all Fisheries Department resources and the Western Samoa Ministry of Women worked with the Agriculture Ministry to prepare a Women and Agriculture policy. On the other hand, Solomon Islands has introduced a Women's Agricultural Extension system which will operate parallel to the existing system. Policy makers believe that a separate system is essential if women are to be guaranteed access to agricultural education and services in that country.

## Future Measures

Positive steps are being taken to address the situation of the education of women and girls. For example, the PNG Ministry of Education's Sector Review (1991-1995) promotes the expansion of female enrolment to a 50:50 ratio at all levels and the incorporation of women's and girls' issues into the literacy and awareness programmes, as well as within the school curriculum. Policy statements about women are also starting to appear in sector reports, such as Agriculture Department policies, those of economic planning, public works, conservation departments and departments of health, and the question of how women can be included in training programmes is being examined. What are some of the issues?

A major debate is *Where should governments place their educational effort?* For example, it is widely argued that governments would get better educational and financial returns by focusing on adult education, rather than on expanding the formal school system. Non-formal education is favoured because intervention at this point might help break down the cycle of deficiency set in motion by under-educated parents. The linking of education with lower fertility rates, higher standards of living and encouragement of daughters to explore new career opportunities is noted, as is the fact that non-formal education brings a better outreach of programmes into rural areas, hence addressing issues of equity at the same time.

*Educational goals* are another point of concern. The fact that Pacific societies are in a state of change adds to the difficulty of deciding what goals should be pursued. For example, women at a recent regional literacy workshop (ASPBAE 1994) emphasised very clearly their wish to maintain customary ways, but at the same time, to learn the knowledge, skills and attitudes which will enable them to operate with confidence in today's rapidly changing times. This reinforces the point that proposed educational interventions must take into account the importance of the customary ways.

*The urgency of supporting structural measures with programmes aimed at changing attitudes* cannot be overemphasised. It is notable that solutions to the problem of lack of women's educational participation are usually couched in terms of structural measures, such as quota systems for women

in courses or scholarships. Structural measures are important, but are insufficient if not accompanied by measures aimed at breaking down the social attitudes which affect women's participation. The pattern of women's educational participation is not determined solely by the availability of places: social and cultural beliefs about women's roles also have an impact on national policies and educational provisions. Influencing factors vary by country, according to the traditional status of women and the level of available resources.

The following constraints to women's participation were noted by delegates to a Women and Education Conference (PNG, 1987): fears that parents may lose control over their daughter's eventual marriage; that educated girls may consider themselves 'above' the agricultural domestic duties of women; and fears for the safety of women students. Hetler and Khoo (1987) list: limited parental resources to keep all children in school; a value system that, in the face of limited family resources, educates sons before daughters; concern for girls' safety when schools (particularly secondary schools) are located some distance from home; social attitudes that girls do not need to be well educated when they are expected to be mothers, housewives and agricultural workers; the idea that a daughter's formal education yields a poor return for parents since whatever income a daughter does earn after marriage goes primarily to the husband's family; and feelings that women will be adequately supported by husbands and hence will not need to earn incomes of their own.

Social perceptions are reflected in administrative and management policies which discriminate against females such as: a lack of facilities for women students (e.g. Solomon Islands has a shortage of accommodation for girls at their provincial secondary schools); insufficient security and safety measures, thus leading, as in PNG, to the sexual harassment of women students on campus. An alleged bias against girls in selection procedures has been reported for Solomon Islands, and in PNG also (Taiwayole and Weeks, 1988).

Efforts to address women's educational status will require attention to measures such as: the gender sensitisation of female teachers and administrators; the careful scrutiny of all curriculum materials and media

presentations so as to counter stereotypical pictures of women and men; the promotion of women educators as role models from preschool through to university and particularly in science and vocational subjects. This latter step is particularly important in PNG where, in contrast to other Pacific countries, the majority of teachers are male.

Whether women's programmes should be *segregated* or *mainstreamed* is another issue. The perception that female students get a fairer deal in single sex girls' schools warrants closer study. For example, it has been recorded that Marianville College graduates (PNG) have achieved outstanding results in national examinations and leadership positions.

*Partnerships.* The situation of women's education is crucial and resources are limited. As a result, partnerships are essential. There is no one partnership model: each must be acceptable and appropriate to the groups who will work together. Partnership possibilities include: NGOs and government, NGO with NGO, NGOs and formal schooling, and between regional countries networking and donor agencies with each other.

Finally, all educational policies and action plans must be specific, clearly defined and grounded in research and have clearly identified targets and performance indicators for effective monitoring. Policies should aim for overall coherence of women's educational opportunities from primary through to higher education, through formal and nonformal education, and across all curriculum sectors.

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