

## **Pacific Women and Lifelong Education<sup>1</sup>**

*Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop*

*Doors open, doors closed, many doors, but  
whose doors are they? Yours, mine or  
doors of society, of whom we are passive  
participants. We do not know.  
Aladdin's door ...*

*a magic word and it is opened. For us  
there is no magic word but education.  
It is our key to the many doors in life.*

Julie Talagi (1987) Avondale College, Auckland NZ

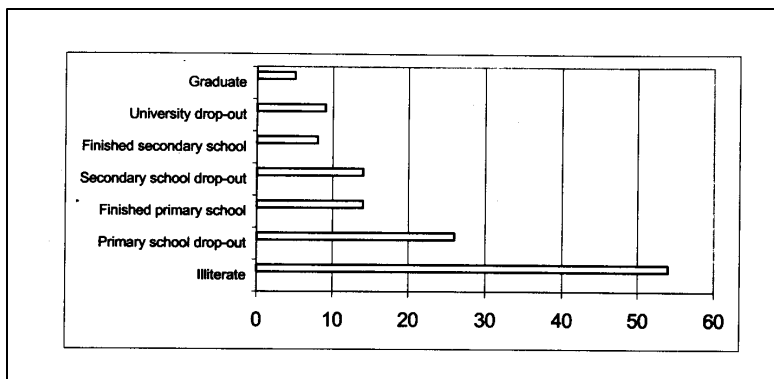
These words written by a Niuean schoolgirl capture the significance of education to Pacific women and men today. In general, the particular importance of the education of women and girls is seen in the correlation between a mother's level of education and her family's quality of life, including family health, livelihood security and children's educational levels. For example, in Table 1 the data from Argentina very clearly highlight the link between women's educational levels and infant mortality rates. Simply put, women need knowledge to operate with confidence in these rapidly changing times. In the Pacific, the endurance of the customary ways means that educational programmes must also teach women about alternatives which will help preserve the considerable autonomy and flexibility of role women enjoyed in the customary systems.

What is the status of women's education in Pacific countries today and what actions are needed to ensure that *Education for All*, the goal of the UN Jomtien Conference (Thailand 1990), becomes a reality?

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**Table 1 The class structure of death: Infant mortality per '000 births, by level of mother's education, Argentina, 1998.**



*Source: Economist May 6, 2002000.*

### **The need for lifelong education – some Pacific realities**

Lifelong education is vital, given the complex and rapid changes taking place as Pacific nations become part of the global economy. Women must have the chance to learn the skills, knowledge and attitudes not only to cope with these changes but also to take steps to shape the future they would like for themselves, their children, and their children's children. Women need income generation skills. Increased aspirations and the growth of the cash economy mean that few families live purely by subsistence means today. Cash is needed for essential household items such as medicine, school fees, kerosene and nails as well as luxury goods such as soap and toothpaste, electricity, television and transport. And yet cash earning opportunities are becoming severely limited in our predominantly semi-subsistence societies. Not only have world markets for agricultural goods declined, all Pacific countries are in the throes of restructuring, a key strategy of which has

been the downsizing of the public sector - traditionally the major employer. In most Pacific countries today there are insufficient jobs for those already unemployed, let alone the huge number of school leavers who hit the job market annually.

Rapid urbanisation in search of waged employment is bringing added pressure on public services, housing and health services, resulting in over-crowding, substandard accommodation, unemployment, increasing poverty and all the social problems associated with these conditions. Furthermore, the erosion of family systems - which have always protected people from the worst effects of development - is seen in the increased number of family breakups, land disputes and the number of women headed households. It is well proven that women-headed households are the most vulnerable group in any society. The question of 'poverty' in Pacific countries was raised in the *Fiji Poverty Report* (UNDP 1997) while *Samoa's Household Income and Expenditure Survey* (UNDP 1999) indicated poverty was not purely an urban phenomena, but affecting a significant number of rural as well as urban families. Not only is poverty more widespread, disparities in income are increasing and more visible. Poverty is evidenced in increased malnutrition, the numbers of children not going to school but staying home to work the family plantation or sell goods on the street, the increasing incidence of domestic violence and abuse, and the unsustainable use of forest and marine resources. In this situation, women are exploring every potential income generation option so as to improve their family quality of life.

Turning to health, Table 2 data shows that achieving good health is a much harder task for Pacific families than for families in, for example, New Zealand or Australia. As seen, large numbers of Pacific families do not have adequate access to health services, safe water, sanitation, or to a doctor or nurse when medical treatment is necessary. The relationship

between access to health services and health status is clearly drawn in this table also. For example, it is highly likely that PNG's high maternal mortality rates (370) and infant mortality rates (77) are influenced by the fact that only one in three PNG births is attended by health personnel and that approximately 75% of the population does not have access to safe water or sanitation. The educational task here is huge - for women (who traditionally have been responsible for health) and also for planners responsible for ensuring women's health priorities are factored into national policies and programmes.

**Table 2: Health and population data, Pacific 1999**

Country	Pop with access to health services	Pop with access to safe water	Pop with access to sanitation	Infant Mortal . Rate IMR	-5yrs deaths/ 1000 live births	% births attended by health personnel	Pop. per doctor	Pop per nurse	Maternal mortality rates
Cook Is	100	95	98	11	9.4	100	910	187	20
Fiji	100	77	85	18	25	100	2,636	468	31
FSM	75	44	51	46	72	82	2,277	318	561
Kiribati	100	76	46	87	88	72	7,681	523	225
Marshall Is	95	82	77	63	82	n.a	2,753	408	0
Nauru	100	100	97	11	n.a	100	1,758	544	0
Niue	100	100	100	18	n.a	100	1,100	110	0
Palau	80	86	95	20	35	100	1,650	198	0
PNG	95	24	25	77	100	33	5,382	998	370
Samoa	100	90	97	22	35	95	2,888	541	70
Solomon Is	80	64	16	38	50	87	7,292	848	550
Tokelau	100	100	64	38	30	100	850	106	170
Tonga	100	95	85	19	21	94	2,184	303	160
Tuvalu	100	85	49	51	59	100	1,186	243	0
Vanuatu	80	87	91	45	58	79	10,811	463	68

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 1999, UNDP Suva.

Given that health is seen to be the work of women and girls, this data reinforces the vital importance of women's education as well as the urgency of adequate health education and services for women and children.

### **Women's access to education and training**

Pacific women's educational status is influenced by a number of factors. First is the overall availability of education. Although all Pacific countries are investing more in education today, educational budgets are severely strained due to the region's very high population growth rates and the expansion of the educational task itself - to include early childhood education through to tertiary and lifelong education. Political considerations can also affect already lean educational budgets, such as the national wish for a university of their own. Table 3 shows the differences in the status of formal education by country. In the Melanesian countries of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and PNG, making primary schooling more widely available is a priority whereas, in the Cook Islands and Tonga, improving the quality and diversity of educational opportunities is the key aim. Despite these and other differences, all Pacific countries face similar educational challenges; achieving early childhood education, universal primary education, adult literacy, training in essential skills and education for better living. Associated are issues of teacher shortages, ensuring that education assists national economic growth, increasing the efficiency of the public and private sector, promoting national identity and culture and resolving the growing mismatch between skills and livelihood opportunities (UNESCO 2000).

**Table 3: Women and Capabilities, Education and Health**

COUNTRY	FEMALE SCHOOL ATTAINMENT		LONGEVITY	
	Pr Sch enrol Ratio (5-14y)	Sec enrol ratio (15-19 y)	Female life exp at birth	% women not expected to survive to age 40
Cook Is	100	49	72.0	4.7
Fiji	90	35	66.5	6.4
FSM	83	43	65.7	10.3
Kiribati	78	47	61.6	14.1
Marshall Is	79	47	65.0	12.4
Nauru	95	37	58.2	14.4
Niue	96	64	74.0	4.8
Palau	90	69	69.0	4.2
PNG	30	19	54.0	25.2
Samoa	94	75	67.0	10.4
Solomon Is	36	18	65.0	13.6
Tokelau	98	69	69.0	7.8
Tonga	91	71	68.0	7.6
Tuvalu	88	35	67.0	7.9
Vanuatu	70	18	66.0	11.6

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 1999, UNDP, Suva.

A second factor influencing women's education is the custom of government-community partnerships in education, which is common in all Pacific countries. For example, in Samoa over 50% of formal schooling is provided by NGOs. The pattern has been that if a village wants a school, the villages provide the land, build the school and maintain the asset while the government trains and provides teaching staff. In addition to this support for formal schooling, community groups (mainly women's committees) have also been the main agency

providing adult education for women and girls once they leave the formal system. These community-driven systems are under pressure in today's depressed economic conditions. Many communities have great difficulty meeting their financial commitment to community assets today and this can affect formal schooling places. Furthermore, women who, in the past, would have been involved in community and NGO training projects are now themselves heavily engaged in informal trading to support the family budget. Undoubtedly, financial constraints are affecting the availability as well as the quality of community training programmes for women.

Social attitudes are a third influence on women's education. While governments and communities may establish the structures for women's equal participation, social attitudes and practices often work against women benefiting fully from these measures. For example, women's education may be influenced by parental attitudes that boys continue their schooling because 'girls will go to their husband's family on marriage', while many a woman's career prospects have been blighted by the attitude that 'males are good at maths and women should learn cooking and home economics'. Structural changes – such as making scholarships available for women to attend an agricultural college – must be accompanied by efforts to change community attitudes - that agriculture is men's work. Pacific women are learning the importance of thinking and acting structurally and attitudinally – but changing prevailing social attitudes is a long-term process.

- **Formal schooling**

Three characteristics of Pacific women's education were identified in the Pacific Women's Status Report for Beijing (see Fairbairn-Dunlop 1994). First, Pacific women did not have equal access with males to primary, secondary and tertiary training. Related, was the finding that the higher the educational

level, the lower the number of women students. Second, the majority of women tertiary students were enrolled in the social sciences compared with males in science courses, so effectively narrowing women's career options. Third, it was found that whatever level of education women achieved, this did not translate into women's participation in the workforce, or in politics for that matter. Here, I focus on access issues.

Generally speaking, recent available data show things have not changed much for women since the 1994 study: women still do not have equal access with males to primary, secondary and/or tertiary training. Table 3 shows that, in the 5-14 age group, it is only in the Cook Islands that there is 100% enrolment for girls. In many countries, it reaches over 90%, but in PNG the figure is 30% and in Solomon Islands it is 36%. Secondary school enrolment ratios show a similar pattern: only in Niue, Palau, Samoa, Tokelau and Tonga is this above 50% (64%, 69%, 75%, 69%, and 71% respectively). The fact that all these countries, bar Palau, are Polynesian warrants further research.

The most compelling indication of women's educational disadvantage is seen in the illiteracy data (Table 4). Only in the Cook Islands is women's illiteracy lower than that of males and it equals that of males in Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu. In all other cases, women's illiteracy levels are higher than for males, quite markedly so in some instances. For example, in Solomon Islands, the illiteracy level for women is nearly 20% higher than for males, 14% higher in PNG and 11% higher in the Federated States of Micronesia. The data suggest women's educational disadvantage is probably not new and draws attention to a huge educational backlog to be addressed. The data also emphasise that serious thought be given to the use of vernacular languages at all levels of training – from pre-school to adult training.



**Table 4: Proportion of adults who are illiterate, by sex, as a percentage of the total population**

Country	Males	Females	Females compared with males
Cook Is	7	6	-1
Fiji	5	9	+4
FSM	23	34	+11
Kiribati	6	9	+3
Marshall Is	21	31	+10
Nauru	5	5	=
Niue	3	3	=
Palau	6	12	+6
PNG	65	79	+14
Samoa	4	4	=
Solomon Is	61	80	+19
Tokelau	8	10	-2
Tonga	1	1	=
Tuvalu	5	5	=
Vanuatu	63	70	+7

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 1999, UNDP Suva  
 This comment to me by a PNG women graduate cuts right to the heart of the matter, showing the vital importance of literacy training:

*When I came back from University I sat with my mother in our little hut at the back of the village and I watched her struggling to read a notice. I felt so humbled and I cried. This moment showed me how my mother had worked to give me all the benefits she never had. That day I vowed to work with X<sup>2</sup> programme to give my mother and the*

<sup>2</sup> The name of the programme is withheld at the request of the informant.

*hundreds of other women like her, the chance to learn to read and write* (Personal communication, PNG, 1987).

The relationship between women's educational access and quality of life are evidenced in other data listed in Table 3, such as life expectancies at birth and the percentage of women not expected to survive to age 40.

- **Non formal systems**

As stated, village committees and national women's groups are the major providers of education and training for women and girls in Samoa, and in other Pacific nations (Fairbairn-Dunlop 1991). Pacific governments are financially unable to set up comprehensive adult education services, even if they had the will to do so, for a substantial proportion of national budgets is committed to the expansion of schools. Through the years, women's committees have responded to this need and their training programmes have followed the times, broadening from a focus on social issues (health) to income-generating activities and on to political awareness, including empowerment and strategic lobbying techniques. Sometimes, the quality of this training has been variable, and often there has been very little pre-course preparation or post-course follow-up to ensure that the new knowledge is used. Access has been another constraint, with some women going to many courses and others receiving no opportunities at all. How women learn about available training is another factor in women's participation, as is whether training is held at a time and place women can attend.

As part of the new governance agenda, government and donor agencies are investing heavily in NGO capacity building and non-formal education is now seen to be an effective and cost-efficient way to teach productive skills. While there has been

some expansion, there are still far too few non-formal places to meet the demand. For example, a 1998 Fiji study of non-formal vocational programmes found 10,950 applications were received for a total of 4,850 places. Table 5 shows the sheer inadequacy of training opportunities generally. Shown also, is that women's access to this small number of places is considerably lower than males.

**Table 5: Students at rural training centres in Melanesian Countries 1995**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Approximate number of students at rural training centres (1-3 year courses*)</b>	<b>Approximate number of young people leaving school each year</b>
PNG	11,200 (7,700 male; 3,500 female)	45,000
Solomon Islands	1,900 (1,200 male; 700 female)	7,500
Vanuatu	300 (210 male; 90 female)	4,000

*Source; UNDP Human Development Report*

*\*These courses include various subjects covering both productive skills and religious training. Women are predominantly enrolled in the religious training.*

Factors influencing women's low participation in non-formal training include: a 'male bias' in the courses offered, the unavailability of facilities for women, and the fact that parents do

not like their daughters studying away from home. The first two factors are more easily addressed than the home related factors.

### **Alternatives**

The educational task is great and the resources are small. What training alternatives can be better utilised for women and girls' education?

- ***Distance Education***

Distance education is a vastly under-utilised resource (see Fairbairn-Dunlop 1999). The University of the South Pacific offers distance courses, as does the University of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands College of Education. USP's Extension courses range from certificate, diploma through to degree. I focus on the certificate courses because Pacific women are flocking to these courses to increase their skills base, and/or gain a qualification which they can use to enrol in further study or for job purposes. The Continuing Education certificate courses target students who have insufficient qualifications for entry into tertiary study and are a model for other countries. Very briefly, the Continuing Education section of USP's Distance Education Unit runs three certificates: the *Pre- School Teachers' Certificate (PPTC)*; the *Disabilities Caregivers*, and the *Certificate in Community Nutrition*. The certificates comprise three courses, each of one semester duration. Enrolment requirements are that students have at least a Form Four education, good reading and speaking skills and some experience working for a community organisation.

Total enrolments in these certificate courses in 1999 were almost 650 and *women made up 98% of these enrolments!* Highest numbers were in the PPTC with over 500 students. A small survey of PPTC graduates showed this training had boosted their income generation options (graduates work in

or set up their own pre-schools), provided entry into further education (such as the USP Diploma in Early Childhood Education) and, no doubt, made this group better parents. Another spin-off from this certificate course is that local graduates are translating materials into the vernacular and running their own national training - so increasing women's training options.

No doubt USP could be accused of gender bias in its certificate offerings, as the three certificate courses may appear to target women. A *Certificate for Community Workers* (in progress) should address this issue.

- **Media**

All Pacific countries have radio, and most have access to television. Both media offer vast opportunities for educational messages to be presented in a fresh way. Funding to develop these messages and for radio/television time to play these messages is a key priority here. Video is another option.

### **Concluding comments**

Lifelong education is vital for Pacific women, given the complex and rapid social and economic changes taking place as our Pacific societies become part of the global social and economic community. Women need the information and skills to make informed choices. Lifelong education must be a top priority, given the significant levels of illiteracy in our countries, the lack of access to primary schooling, the poor quality of some of this schooling, and the severe shortage of post-primary places. In short, lifelong education must be available for the large numbers of *pushed outs* and the *never ins* in our formal school systems. There is compelling evidence that youth, women and those living in rural areas should be targeted for preferential treatment. Lifelong education today must address a wide range of training needs: basic living skills such

as health and care for the environment and respect for others; income-generation or economic skills; and political or civic empowerment. It must also embrace our cultural norms, values and attitudes which, we emphasise, are at the heart of our 'dual development goal'.

The main issues for training 'hopefuls' are equitable access (such as locality of course, cost, knowledge that the training is available); the relevance of training; and the quality of post training support. (Does the training link into a job? Is there a small loans scheme available so that women can buy equipment?) Given the scarcity of economic resources and the critical need for lifelong learning, it is vital to establish systems which are sustainable; provide high-quality, relevant training and post-training support; network into new ideas and technology so that there is growth within the programme; have the capacity to respond to these changing needs; and are affordable.

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