Increasing numbers of men and women have established homes, livelihoods and families on lands in Honiara they cannot own (see also Keen and Barbara 2015). Settlers come from all the nation’s islands, may attend school, work in formal jobs, and/or earn a living in the informal sector. Their struggles illuminate and challenge the idea that land is the crucial basis for social protection, food security, identity and social relations in the region. SSGM’s research on urbanisation in Honiara aims to engage with government, business, and settlement communities to inform and mobilise urban planning, policy and research priorities. From August to September 2016, the authors partnered with World Vision Solomon Islands to conduct five focus groups involving 50 women aged 18–65, from three of Honiara’s settlement communities: Sun Valley, White River, and Lord Howe.1 The research aimed to generate insights into women’s experiences and priorities. This In Brief describes women’s views on and experiences of city life.

There is diversity among and within settlements (see Lacey 2011). The settlements we worked in are all relatively longstanding and have road access. Sun Valley is a peri-urban area on the eastern outskirts of greater Honiara in Guadalcanal province. Lord Howe is a small, high-density community in the centre of town adjacent to the hospital. White River is a large, more dispersed settlement on the western edge of Honiara, with its own school and market. Women’s experiences in settlements in hilly areas without road access would differ from those with whom we spoke.

Happy to Call Honiara Home

Participants were clear that they preferred living in Honiara to rural areas. With the exception of a few women who only visited the city because their husbands lived in the settlements, none of the women spoke of wishing to return to a rural home. Some women had lived in their community for 50 years. As one woman from Sun Valley noted, ‘we have been here a long time, we cannot leave’.

Both younger and older women said they preferred Honiara because it offered the most opportunities to earn a living and access government services. The ways they could earn money, although challenging, were said to enable an ‘easy life’ relative to rural living and subsistence gardening.2 Women have a more significant role to play in cash generation in the city than in the village, allowing them more access to the finances necessary to provide for their and their family’s needs. Women said they valued the city lifestyle for a number of reasons, including the variety of goods available for purchase, availability of transportation and markets, and access to schooling. ‘We found it much easier to generate income to send our children to schools’ (Sun Valley participant). Younger women praised diversity, technology, and ‘luxury’ in the city (see also Knot 2009).

Getting Service: Not All Easy Going

Women identified common challenges of city life. Available services were not necessarily easy to access. School fees were said to be too high and this hampered children’s participation. Available transportation was not necessarily affordable or convenient. There were also community-specific challenges. Young women in Lord Howe mentioned they were sometimes prevented from attending school by their parents once they reached a certain age at which they were expected to stay home and focus on domestic duties. Mothers in White River noted young men were not necessarily attending school and this had negative effects on their behaviour and economic prospects.

Some services were unavailable. Women in Lord Howe expressed frustration and dismay regarding the lack of water and sanitation facilities that forced them to wash and defecate in the ocean. This deficiency has a disproportionate impact on women, especially those of menstrual age, who may also be exposed to security risks while bathing or defecating in public spaces, and whose role it is to gather water for the family. While White River has piped water, there are not enough
water sources to service the population. Access to water requires walking distances and waiting in the heat. Sun Valley also lacks access to water, which requires women to dig for often dirty, unhealthy bore water. White River has its own market, but Sun Valley does not, and being the farthest of the settlements (where we worked) from Honiara Central Market, women identified this as a problem.

Looking for Peace

Women spoke of violence, often alcohol-fuelled (see WHO 2013). Many said this was caused by the failure of cultural norms to maintain a strong influence on youth in urban environments. Younger women attributed violent “disturbances” to law and order problems, rather than waning cultural influences. Young women in Lord Howe, at the centre of town, said their parents restricted their mobility and insisted they wear lava-lava (patterned cloth skirt) when outside the settlement in part because of concerns about violence. Young women in Lord Howe did seem to face the most conservative gender norms overall—an important illustration of how urban living may reflect or produce gendered cultural controls on women in different ways depending on the context. Older, married women were concerned that perpetrators of violence might be their sons, nephews, or husbands, and wanted interventions with young men (see Evans 2016). Women also referred to intimate partner violence, suggesting it is more common in urban areas, including Honiara, than in rural areas (SPC 2009).

Moving Ahead

Settlements are a reality of rapidly urbanising towns and cities, and play a powerful role in shaping future national economic and social developments. As income earners with real life expertise, women’s voices, challenges, and experiences must be reflected in urban policy. Some aspects worth following up include: women’s mobility between settlements and rural areas; diversity in women’s circumstances and the intersections between gender, income, and power in settlements; women’s caring responsibilities, including for school-age migrants; and how young women are navigating the positives and negatives of city life. It is important to understand gender norms or fears of violence that may inhibit female education, mobility, and economic participation, and to explore what leads to violence. Given political leaders, policymakers, and the women with whom we spoke are all considering questions of culture in the urban space, further explorations are needed on how cultural identity and wellbeing can fruitfully be part of community and policy responses to urban challenges.

Acknowledgements

We thank the World Vision researchers and the participants for their contributions to this research.

Author Notes

Jessica Carpenter is a senior research officer and Jenny Munro a research fellow at SSGM

Endnotes

1. Discussion groups with men took place in October 2016.
2. See SSGM In Brief 2016/31 on women’s livelihoods.

References

SPC (Secretariat of the Pacific Community) 2009. Solomon Islands Family Health and Safety Study: A Study on Violence against Women and Children. Noumea: SPC.