



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

*Celebrating 20 years of SSGM and 70 years of Pacific studies at The Australian National University*

## Women's Livelihoods in Honiara Settlements

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The gender disparities in employment in Solomon Islands are well documented (see ADB 2015). This In Brief describes recent research on women's informal urban livelihoods and economic participation.<sup>1</sup> It forms part of the SSGM project [Honiara Urbanisation: Managing Change, Harnessing Opportunities](#), which aims to better inform donors and policymakers about development priorities, opportunities, and prospects by engaging with a range of stakeholders, including settlement communities. From August to September 2016, the authors partnered with World Vision Solomon Islands to conduct five focus groups with a total of 50 women aged 18–65 from Sun Valley, White River, and Lord Howe settlements.<sup>2</sup> The findings reflect the complexities of women's livelihoods, which encompass not just engagement with the labour market, but traditional gender roles in the urban family and community, and networking and associations such as lending schemes and savings clubs.

### Earning a Living in the City

Women clearly stated there are more livelihood opportunities for them in the city than in the village — most importantly, opportunities for generating cash income. Women identified their main livelihood activities as informal, including: selling baked food such as cakes or fish and chips; selling betel nut; and selling fresh food, both garden produce and fish. They sell these items either at the markets or at roadside stands near their homes. The ease of access to informal employment was one reason living in the city was often referred to as an 'easy life'. Women said more women work in the informal sector than men. This is consistent with other research that found women dominated in agriculture and catering — similar to gendered patterns of work in village settings (Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA), and that 90% of market vendors in Solomon Islands are women (PIFS 2013). As one woman from Sun Valley noted, 'we say men are the breadwinners, but in the city women are the breadwinners'.

Informants identified lending schemes as a prominent livelihood activity spreading 'like wildfire' through the city, partly motivated by the pressing need to access finances to support urban families and livelihoods. While Lord Howe women also described a community savings plan, it was noted in Sun Valley that it is a lot harder to save money in the city than the village as earnings are used to purchase food that would otherwise be grown in rural areas. The most prolific urban lending scheme is the South Pacific Business Development (SPBD) Microfinance Institution, which has disbursed over AUD\$5.8 million and 9,102 loans since commencing operations in January 2013 (SPBD 2016). Participants noted there are a huge variety of lending schemes in each settlement, both community-based and individually operated. While not regulated, most lenders provide small loans of around SB\$2000 (about AU\$300), at a 20% interest rate, for a one-year term. Women said the loans are used to pay for school fees, house upgrades, and commodities such as a car, or just to 'buy something nice for yourself'.

Women's engagements with microcredit are complex, and the effects on empowerment are debatable (see Mayoux 2000). The women we talked to identified both positive and negative impacts of lending schemes in their communities. Beyond access to finance, women said lending schemes connect women and enable their co-operation. One woman from Sun Valley noted the schemes encouraged women to work together to generate livelihoods, which was often a challenge. Schemes such as SPBD also offer financial literacy education aimed at improving women's skills. Alternatively, participants acknowledged that debt distress is a definite risk with lending schemes. Intimidation tactics are used when repayments are delayed, and borrowers were said to call upon relatives at times to help repay debts, which spreads the negative effects of debt and could create tensions. Despite the risks and pressures, most women view lending schemes as a helpful and positive initiative.

## Common Challenges

Several common challenges to livelihood activities were raised, notably: the lack of a diversity of goods to sell, which creates competition and drives down prices; high transport and other running costs; and geographical and environmental challenges. In Sun Valley, garden areas flood every year, ruining produce grown for sale and consumption. In Lord Howe, there is no space for gardening, which reduces livelihood options and removes the safety net of self-grown produce when cash to purchase food runs short. This is also a problem in White River, with only one woman noting she had access to land, but it was a long walk from her house. Access to the markets was a significant challenge, with many women lamenting increasing fees, the lack of space and poor facilities. A representative of the Guadalcanal Council of Women noted that 'markets are not just an important need. It's a *great* need... It is urgent.' Another young woman from White River also stressed the importance of market facilities, saying 'no market means no food'.

Women's ability to earn income and sustain their families is also affected by gendered norms and expectations. Women balance earning a living with many other competing roles and duties, including cooking, cleaning, and caring duties. Some women attributed higher levels of domestic violence in the city to women earning more money than their husbands or partners, especially in the context of urban socioeconomic pressures. A participant in Sun Valley argued that women were keeping silent on this reality and needed to speak up. Some women said men spend women's income without consulting them, which undermines their ability to provide for their family. In this sense, women were pointing to the importance of decision-making, not just income generation, in managing livelihoods. This is a significant issue impacting on empowerment, urban planning, violence and poverty (see also ADB 2015).

## Next Steps

While microfinance is well researched across the region (see Singh 2011), the impact of lending schemes and their debt pressures on women in Honiara, where financial literacy is sparser and expenses are higher, needs further attention. Women's urban associations, or lack thereof, as a means of social, political, and economic empowerment, warrant further study. How and when do women work together towards livelihood goals? What makes co-operation and organising difficult? There is increasing recognition that women may experience violence in relation to their income and financial

decision-making when the norms and conditions underpinning male dominance go unchallenged (Eves and Crawford 2014).

Possible future policy directions were also identified. Work with couples, families, and communities could open pathways for women to have more control over financial decision-making, which tends to produce more family investment in education, health and nutrition (PIFS 2013). But there is also a need for space for women's livelihood goals and challenges to be voiced and discussed at broader political and governmental levels of decision-making.

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## Author Notes

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

## Endnotes

1. See also In Brief 2016/30 on women's views on and experiences of city life.
2. Focus groups with men were conducted in October 2016.

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