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## WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

Marion W. Ward

This monograph is one in a series which reports on the National Centre for Development Studies' project *Pacific 2010*. It seeks to highlight the consequences of failing to recognise and plan the effects of population growth in the island states of the South Pacific over the next two decades.

The challenges of planning for the long-term needs of Pacific states is directed not only to the island leaders but also to those responsible for the design and delivery of all forms of overseas development assistance.

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# **PACIFIC**

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### **Women and employment in Solomon Islands**

Marion W. Ward

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## Author

Marion Ward is a consultant who has undertaken a number of studies concerning the advancement of women in developing and developed countries. She has worked in most South Pacific countries, as well as in many countries in Asia and Africa. She is also a former staff member of the Australian National University.

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## Foreword

This paper had its origins in a joint effort by the National Centre for Development Studies at the Australian National University and the ILO/UNDP 'EMPLA' Project (Employment Promotion, Manpower Planning and Labour Administration in the Pacific). Two papers were written. Marion Ward wrote on employment for women in the formal sector, and provided an overall statistical background and Flores Arias provided an analysis of women's employment opportunities in the informal sector, including the subsistence sector. Background information for the two studies was obtained during two independent missions to the Solomon Islands.

In this paper the issues from both papers have been synthesised to project policy implications emerging from the earlier papers.

**Ila Temu**

**Director**

**Islands/Australia Research Program**

**National Centre for Development Studies**

**September 1995**



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## POLICIES FOR EMPLOYING WOMEN

### **Women in the economy**

Women make a substantial contribution to the growth and development of the Solomon Islands economy. Women have most of the responsibility for subsistence agricultural production—on which the welfare of most Solomon Islanders depends—but the importance of their contribution is often ignored by development planners and policymakers focused on men's involvement with cash cropping. Programs designed to assist smallholder cash cropping often overlook and even undermine women's subsistence production and small-scale produce marketing.

Women also make a substantial contribution to both the household and national economy through their participation in formal and informal sector employment, including self-employment. Women's high participation rates in subsistence agriculture contrast with their low participation rates in the modern cash sector. In the 1986 census most Solomon Islanders (84 per cent of females and 87 per cent of males) over 14 years of age were economically active, participating in village work, paid work, or both. But only 13 per cent of the women, compared with 35 per cent of the men, indicated that they worked for money (McMurray 1993:98). By 1992 women's

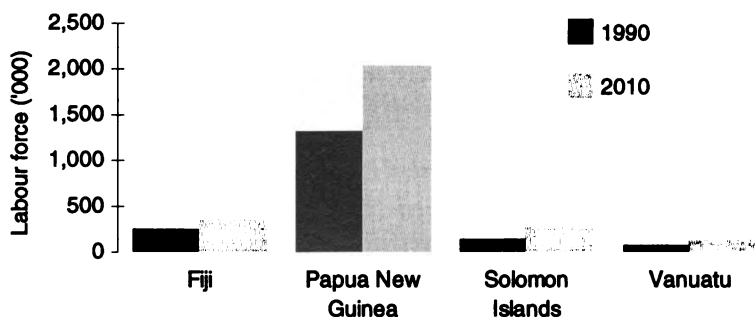
participation in paid work had risen to 21 per cent, about half of whom lived in Honiara.

In comparison with men, women's employment tends to be concentrated in low skill and poorly paid work. In 1992, however, women were working in a more diverse range of industries, including jobs in banking and finance, transport and communications, and process work in factories. Many of the women in full-time employment were working in the public service.

### Women and unemployment

*Pacific 2010* projections on population and growth suggest that serious unemployment threatens the Solomon Islands throughout the rest of this century and into the first decade of the next. Between 1978 and 1987 paid employment opportunities grew by about 4 per cent per annum, but this amounted to only 722 jobs per annum for the 5,500 young people entering the workforce each year (National Centre for Development Studies 1994:14).

Figure 1 Labour force projections, to 2010



Source: Cole, R.V. (ed.), 1993. *Pacific 2010: challenging the future*, Pacific Policy Paper 9, National Centre for Development Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Women will face even stiffer competition for jobs than they do at present, although it is possible that skills developed as professional, technical and manual workers may enable them to hold or expand their relative position in the workforce. Some sectors in which women's share of employment has been expanding, such as formal sector agriculture, trade, transport and communications, finance, tourism, and other services are expected to grow, with a corresponding increase in the number of positions available to women.

### **A national policy for women**

Proactive government policy to reduce unemployment of women is necessary. A major problem identified for women engaged in or seeking employment in the Solomon Islands is lack of access to appropriate information. Improving women's level of education and providing access to training programs is one way of addressing this problem. Equal opportunity for women, particularly equal access to information about jobs and equality in selection procedures, is also essential.

With 80 per cent of the Solomon Islands population involved in agriculture, rural growth is particularly important to job creation. Agriculture, fishing, forestry, logging, and private and informal sector services provide the most potential for new jobs, with industrialisation 'taking a strong second place behind employment generation in the primary sector' (Birks and Marau 1989).

Despite their significant contribution to household and national economies, the large group of women engaged in subsistence production or involved in self-employed income-earning activities is not receiving the support required.

The few programs which specifically target female workers are mainly implemented by non-government organisations and often lack the financial resources and staff to enhance women's competitiveness in subsistence agriculture and self-employment.

The government's National Women's Policy is a large step in the right direction. The Policy recognises women's vital role in agriculture, fisheries and forestry, as well as the importance of these to national economic growth. It also acknowledges the contribution to the national economy of women's subsistence and household income-generating activities and women's potential for small business development.

The Policy addresses women's concerns at all levels of government by introducing women's divisions or units into key ministries where national level decisions are made. This will enable the government to coordinate programs designed specifically for women with other development activities. It will eventually lead to the integration of women's concerns into the mainstream of development planning by systematically weaving them into all sectoral projects.

The Policy advocates promotion of women's production potential.

- **Vocational skills development** among women in non-traditional areas is to be promoted by enhancing women's participation in existing vocational training programs and by formulating and implementing specific projects and programs for women.
- **Small business participation** by women is to be encouraged by government with strategies supporting the transition from subsistence and household income generation activities to small businesses. Training programs, credit facilities, market outlets, and protective measures at the initial stages are key issues to be addressed.

The National Women's Policy is a first serious step towards mainstreaming women's needs and concerns in government policies and programs. It is imperative that the policy receive the political support and commitment required and that sufficient resources are made available for efficient implementation of the policy.

### **Women in agriculture: recommendations**

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries undertakes outreach to rural areas through its extension network. Its programs focus mainly on cash crops for export. In 1986 the principal source of cash for most villagers was copra, with cocoa running a close second (Ilala 1992:231). While men dominate export-oriented tree crop production, women do the bulk of other agricultural work, including food cropping for household consumption and sale in local markets. Few resources are directed specifically at women or at providing incentives for them to enter cash cropping. Although some researchers argue that 'village based smallholdings are the only viable strategic option for the development of farming systems in Melanesia' (Hardaker and Fleming 1994:41), the focus of government policy is almost always on the cash cropping undertaken by men. With women responsible for the majority of household agricultural production, their needs must be taken seriously and supported.

The establishment of a women's unit within the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries will provide an infrastructure through which issues affecting women in agriculture can be addressed, including

- agricultural skills training for women farmers
- research on and development of crops grown by women
- dissemination of information to women in provincial locations
- credit schemes
- agricultural cooperatives
- coordination of women's organisations and programs
- sensitising and training on women's actual and potential roles in agriculture.

The provision of education and training is essential. A Women's Agricultural Extension Service Programme has been established to improve women's participation in the general programs implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

### **Women in business: recommendations**

The role played by the informal sector in the national economy is not sufficiently acknowledged in the provision of support services. Most promotion programs are focused on formal employment. The government has given priority to industrial development in order to promote import substitution, exports and job creation, but it is the promotion of small Solomon Islander-owned businesses that is increasingly important to employment.

While the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Employment has not formulated an overall policy on the promotion of women in business, its Business Development Division is keen on promoting women's role in this area. Through its network of business advisers in the field, the Division is in the best position to support women's income-generating activities. So far, its achievements in supporting self-employed women have been modest, due to a lack of expertise on women's issues in general and on income-generating activities for women in particular.

Strategies to encourage women in business should be undertaken by government.

- A formal mechanism to facilitate coordination and consultation regarding informal women's businesses should be established. The Business Division is setting up a national consultative committee with representatives of non-government organisations, financial institutions, the Solomon Islands College for Higher Education (SICHE) and others to promote better coordination of programs supporting self-employed women, and to exchange information and experience at both national and provincial

levels. It is advisable that a subcommittee be set up to address women's issues.

- Overseas experience should be incorporated into the training of Business Development Division staff. The Women's Development Division should investigate successful women's income-generating projects, credit schemes, business management training programs in both developing countries such as Papua New Guinea, India, the Philippines or Bangladesh, and in industrialised countries. This would provide new ideas about ways to encourage Solomon Islands women to become more 'business minded'.
- In 1994 Women in Development Division staff travelled around the provinces educating village women about the role of the Division and seeking information on these women's concerns and problems. A series of workshops on basic business principles, marketing and distribution of produce has begun and should be continued.

### **The Women in Development Division**

The Women in Development Division, located in the Ministry of Youth, Women, Sport and Recreation, is responsible for policy development and implementation. Its aims are

- to promote an increased and more effective role for women in decision-making and national development
- to improve the availability and circulation of information and resources relating to the welfare of women and the family unit
- to facilitate women's training programs and develop appropriate knowledge and skills for women.

### **Women's roles: recommendations**

There is a need for social education to inform both families and societies of the benefits to families of educating girls. Governments themselves need to be convinced. The benefits that will flow include: reduced population growth because of delayed age of marriage and lowered fertility; longer life expectancy; increased labour productivity; higher earnings; higher taxes on earnings and higher GNP growth (National Centre for Development Studies 1994:12).

Stereotypes concerning appropriate roles for women and men continue to be a strong feature of Solomon Islands society. Women's limited access to education, training, capital, marketing information, decision-making bodies, and other resources, as well as women's responsibility for childcare and domestic work, all contribute to women's subordinate status in society and development. It is impossible to enhance women's productivity without simultaneously addressing the basic needs of women, such as access to education, birth control, health and medical services. Efforts to enhance women's productivity are unlikely to be successful if women's status and position in society, and their reproductive roles, are not simultaneously addressed.

The assumption that girls will marry and take care of families often influences parents' decisions to stop older girls from going to school, while their brothers are allowed to continue (Gannicott and Avalos 1994:16). Yet international evidence indicates that the education of women has substantial social benefits not only for the woman herself, but for her family and the society at large. There is a direct relationship between the size of the gap between men's and women's educational attainment and per capita GNP—the larger the gap, the lower the GNP (Gannicott and Avalos 1994:20). The elimination of discrimination against women, particularly in access to education and training opportunities, is essential.

An effective way to sensitise men and women to potential or actual discriminatory practices is through awareness training. A team

from the UNIFEM Mainstream Project based in Suva has provided awareness training to other South Pacific countries. They or other such groups could be engaged to run a similar program in Solomon Islands, with the local team gender balanced and comprising mainly Melanesian Solomon Islanders.

Role models are also important, as they provide a practical demonstration of the success of equal employment opportunity principles and show that with proper training, women and men are equally capable of doing any particular job. This is an effective way of reducing stereotyping of women as domestic workers and requires proactive publicity focusing on women's efforts in the Solomons and other island countries.

‘Conservative attitudes, supported by culture and religion, still prevail in Solomon Islands society, resulting in discrimination against women in the workforce and restrictions on those wanting to engage in paid work.’

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## WOMEN IN BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT JOBS

### Women in the workforce

In 1992 at least 5,000 women were in the formal (monetary sector) workforce, and perhaps another 8,000 engaged partly or informally in the formal sector workforce. By far the greatest number of economically active women in Solomon Islands (some 67,000) worked in the informal rural subsistence sector.

### Women in business and government

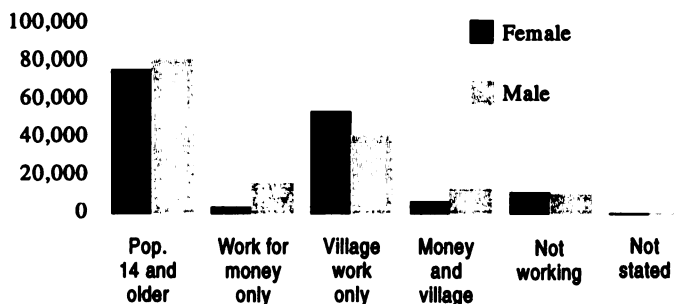
- About half the women in the formal sector workforce are in Honiara, with some 1,000 of these also engaged in subsistence activities.
- The number of women in the formal sector workforce has been growing at over 6 per cent per annum since about 1981, three times faster than the number of men. Women formed 21 per cent of the formal sector workforce in 1992 as opposed to 13.5 per cent in 1986.
- Women are working in a more diverse range of industries than formerly. Their occupational roles are gradually changing from the traditional areas of nursing, teaching, clerical and secretarial and work in the service industries,

to jobs in banking and finance, formal sector agriculture, transport and communications, and process work in factory industries. Some new ventures, originating in subsistence activities such as charcoal making, garden production, handicrafts and paid housekeeping, have been established.

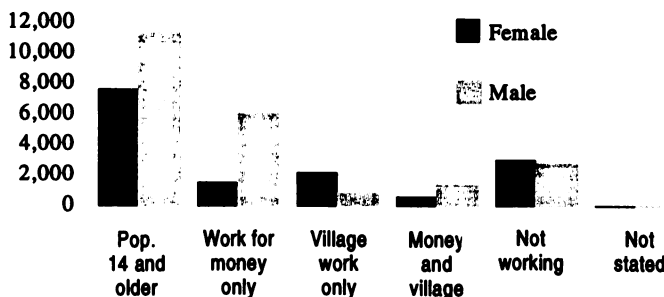
- An estimated 3,000 women are employed in the public service, accounting for 36 per cent of employees. For the most part they are concentrated at middle and low levels. This concentration in lower levels of the employment hierarchy also applies to women in the private sector, where about 2,000 women are employed, mostly as manual workers.

**Figure 2 Economically active population by sex, 1986**

## Solomon Islands

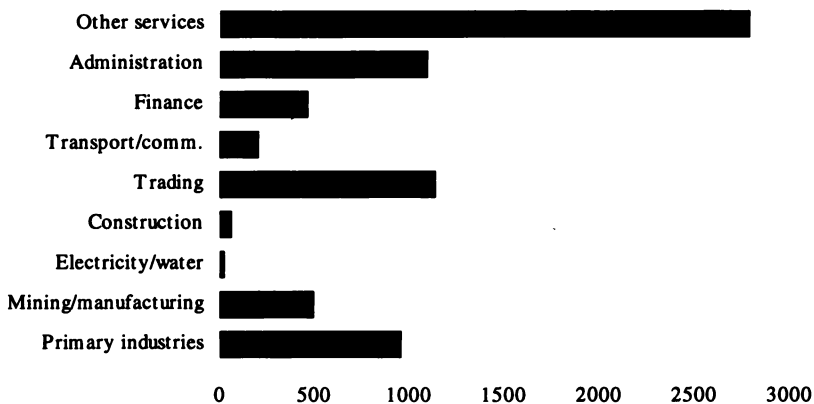


## Honiara



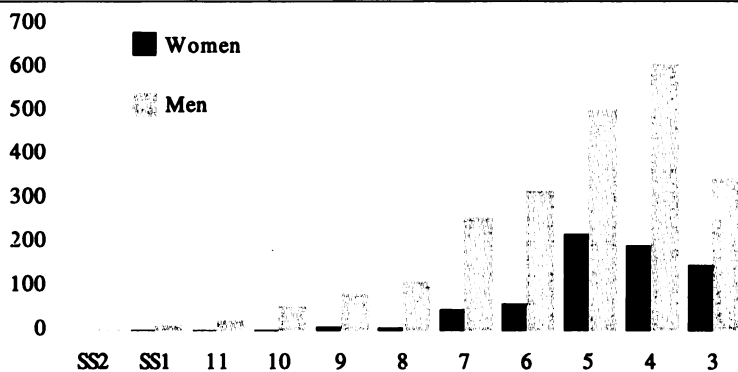
**Source:** Solomon Islands Statistical Office, *Report on the Census of Population 1986*, Report 2.A. Basic Information, Honiara:352.

**Figure 3 Women's employment by industry, 1991**



**Source:** Solomon Islands, Statistical Office, 1992. *Labour Force Statistics 1991*, SI Statistical Bulletin 7/92, Honiara: Table 10.

**Figure 4 Public sector employment by level and sex, 1992**



**Note:** SS2 and SS1 are senior levels; level 3 is the lowest level.

**Source:** Personnel Management Section, Solomon Islands Public Service Office, Honiara, unpublished data.

## Constraints to women's wider workforce participation

**Prevailing conservative attitudes** Despite advances in education, more liberal attitudes amongst younger people, increasing numbers of women participating in monetised employment and external pressures for equal opportunity for women, conservative attitudes still prevail in Solomon Islands society, resulting in discrimination against women in the workforce and restrictions on those wanting to engage in paid work.

The adoption of non-traditional roles in the workforce is said to contribute to domestic violence against women and 'domestic problems' is one of the most commonly cited reasons for women's absenteeism from jobs.

**Marriage, childbearing and domestic responsibilities** Solomon Islands has the second highest population growth rate in the world (3.5 per cent per annum), a result of high birth rates and falling death rates. The total fertility rate (number of births per woman) was 7.3 in 1971-76 and 6.3 in 1977-86, with very high teenage fertility rates (McMurray 1993). At the time when women are most likely to enter the workforce, reproduction and responsibilities to their partner, children and extended family are at their most demanding phase.

High social value continues to be placed on large families. Less than 15 per cent of women of reproductive age are estimated to practise family planning. While there is no detailed government policy on the provision of contraceptives, in practice, contraceptives are not supplied to unmarried people, despite current concern about sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. As long as women's control over fertility is limited, so too are their opportunities to enter the workforce.

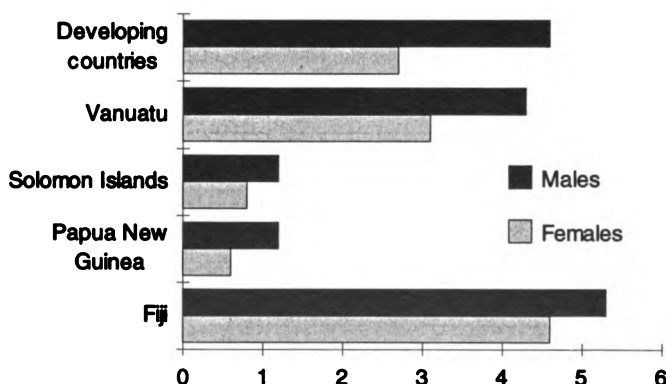
**Lack of access to education** Equal access to education and training is essential if women's access to employment is to improve. Women's access to formal education in Solomon Islands has always been less than that of males, and this access decreases with progression up the educational ladder.

Education opportunities are generally limited in Solomon Islands, with Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea having the lowest levels of educational attainment in the Pacific region (Figure 5). Solomon Islands females fare worse than males, having only 0.8 mean years of schooling in 1990 (Gannicott and Avalos 1994).

At the primary school level fewer girls enrol than boys, and girls' dropout rates are much higher. In 1991, 45 per cent of boys completed primary school compared with only 33 per cent of girls; by year 12 (6th Form), only 25 per cent of the students were female (Gannicott and Avalos 1994).

Factors contributing to gender imbalance at the secondary level include cultural bias against education for girls, an alleged bias against females in the selection processes, and lack of dormitory places for girls at provincial boarding schools. The sexual harassment of female students by male students in secondary schools (particularly those with boarders) has also become a major problem. Some of these problems will be reduced as new education initiatives supported by the World Bank, AusAID and other donors

**Figure 5**      **Schooling of females and males, 1990 (mean years)**



**Source:** Gannicott, K.G. and Avalos, B., 1994. *Pacific 2010: women's education and development in Melanesia*, Pacific Policy Paper 12, National Centre for Development Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra: Table 3.

begin to take effect, although it will be necessary to continue to work consciously towards equal access to education and training opportunities for women in Solomon Islands.

At the post-secondary level the situation for women is equally grim. In 1992 and 1993 women comprised only 26 per cent of the students enrolled in the Solomon Islands College for Higher Education (SICHE), 15 per cent of Solomon Islands students at the University of the South Pacific, and 20 per cent of the recipients of post-secondary scholarships (Gannicott and Avalos 1994).

Women students tended to be concentrated in fields which are traditionally seen to be 'feminine'. In 1991 females comprised 64 per cent of the enrolment of the Nursing and Health School, 31 per cent of the School of Education, and 30 per cent of the School for Finance and Administration. Female enrolment in courses in marine activities and fisheries, industrial development, and natural resources accounted for only 2.5 per cent of the total enrolment.

The low priority given to non-formal education and the agricultural sector also adversely affects women's access to skills, information and extension services. Outside the formal education system women have limited access to training and educational opportunities. Most training programs for women concentrate on home economics and neglect women's productive role in food production, resource management and income-generating activities. Women receive little training in agricultural production.

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## **WOMEN AND SUBSISTENCE AGRICULTURE**

In traditional Melanesian culture, women were the child educators, food producers and resource managers. These roles continue to be crucial in contemporary Melanesia. The current transition from traditional subsistence to a 'modern' cash economy is exerting pressure on women, changing and often undermining their traditional roles as well as increasing their workload. Women play a central role in subsistence and semi-subsistence production activities, and these have a direct impact on family welfare and the national economy. National planning and resource allocations often neglect women's vital contribution to economic productivity, providing little assistance to their participation.

### **Subsistence agriculture is still important**

The importance of the agricultural sector to national income and its role in providing food and income to more than 80 per cent of the population is central to development in Solomon Islands. The share of the national budget allocated to agriculture, however, is very low (2.58 per cent in 1991) and there is currently no national development plan to which those responsible for implementing programs in agriculture can refer.

Rural producers have shown a marked tendency to sell all of their produce in the market in order to buy tinned fish and rice—in many cases to the detriment of their health. Increased productivity and increased variety of agricultural produce, especially vegetables, would improve the diet of Solomon Islanders, reducing their reliance on purchased, processed food and generally improve health, standard of living and quality of life. The neglect of the food-producing subsistence sector results in increased health problems, accelerated urbanisation, unemployment and other associated problems which, in the long run, place greater pressure on the country's scarce resources and hinder development.

In striving for development, emphasis has been placed on expanding the productive base of the country and entry into the cash economy. For Solomon Islands this has meant the introduction of and emphasis on cash cropping and the exploitation of resources, such as forests.

Government policies have an impact on production decisions and the shifting of producers' resources from food to cash crop production. Unlike cash cropping there are no support services or subsidies for staple and other food: household food production is often viewed as a supplementary activity by development planners.

Budget constraints mean that the availability of donor aid largely determines the level of agricultural support programs, and these are largely concerned with export crops. Some non-government organisations like the Solomon Islands Development Trust and the Sup-Sup Garden program in Honiara have directed their efforts to support household food production through nutrition education, low-cost technology and promoting the cultivation of indigenous plants.

The production of food and other essential goods ensures a high degree of self-sufficiency at the rural household and village level, as well as support for many living in urban areas. According to the 1986 Population Census, about one-quarter of the labour force 'worked for money' and three-quarters did not. The most common

activity of those who did not was 'village work without pay', with 51.3 per cent of males and 71.3 per cent of females in this category. For women, village work without pay means subsistence and traditional agriculture.

There was a great deal of variation among the provinces in women's participation in subsistence agriculture, ranging from 85 per cent in Makira to 65 per cent in Western Province, reflecting the different levels of monetisation among the provinces. In urban areas subsistence farming is still important and, given access to land, urban women continue to engage in subsistence production.

A closer look at rural households reveals that the division between the cash and subsistence sector is not rigid, as many households are involved in the sale of produce. A large part of household income is derived from food sales with up to 67 per cent of households selling some kind of produce, particularly to local markets.

### **Women's double burden**

Women in Solomon Islands work longer hours than men. The division of labour between women and men and household decisions regarding labour allocation are complex, but in general, women in the Solomon Islands do the majority of the work in food production, gardening and gathering reef foods, while men do a large share of treecrop cultivation and fishing.

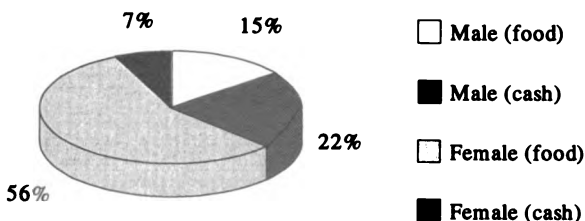
'Women in Solomon Islands work longer hours than men. In 7 out of 10 villages women worked more days than men and in two villages women did three times as much work.'

Women are responsible for the production of staple foods for household consumption and for the maintenance of food gardens. Men's contribution to food production consists of cutting trees, burning, clearing and digging. While in some remote areas non-monetised exchange of agricultural surplus is still practised, the agricultural surplus in coastal areas and around Honiara and provincial centres is marketed, providing a cash income. Women, however, may not reap the full benefit of their work in producing goods for market, because their menfolk often do the 'public' work of selling and may appropriate the proceeds for leisure activities.

Only a few crops are suitable for marketing at provincial and national markets and in the past this choice has been limited by the subsidy paid to treecrop producers through price support. While there are difficulties in getting produce to markets because of transport, diversification in other Pacific island economies has shown that with proper incentives, new crops can be produced and marketed successfully.

In coastal villages women are active in subsistence fishing activities which include reef gleaning for shell fish as well as fishing from canoes. Traditionally, the forest has also provided numerous resources for the household economy with women collecting fruits, leaves, seeds and nuts for household consumption and for the market.

**Figure 6** Total effort invested in subsistence and cash crops by sex, Kolombangara, Western Province, 1989 (per cent)



**Source:** Rural Services Project/Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, 1989.

In addition to agricultural production, women are generally responsible for domestic maintenance work, including cleaning, food preparation, childcare and the care of sick and elderly family members. Women are also generally responsible for small animal husbandry and collecting water and fuel. These activities, in addition to women's participation in cash and food crop production, mean women's work load is extremely heavy.

A survey on household labour allocation in 40 households indicated that women spent significantly larger amounts of time on total smallholder cultivation than their male counterparts. In 7 out of 10 villages women worked more days than men and in two villages women did three times as much work.

### **Problems for women in subsistence agriculture**

Smallholder cropping patterns have traditionally been complex and diverse. Production decisions in food gardening are influenced by decisions made in cash cropping and vice versa. Women's decision-making power in the household is therefore of great importance as women and men often have different priorities with regard to land and labour allocations to food gardens and cash crops.

**Women's land rights** Maintenance of women's land rights is now emerging as an important issue in some parts of the country. Access to land, particularly women's access to land for food gardens, is essential to the self-sufficiency of the smallholder production system. The introduction of cash cropping and the logging of forests is creating new and exacerbating existing problems for women. The use of the best land closest to the village for cash crops has meant that women now have to walk further to their food gardens and work harder to produce the same quality and yield of food on marginal land. The encouragement of women to grow cash crops has sometimes proved detrimental to women's welfare, as men may take over

the crops once they see the women making money. This pushes women even further into the bush to grow subsistence crops and makes their lives more difficult than before. Moreover, in the rush to reap the cash rewards from logging and mining, customary land has been signed away without proper consultation with women who have the customary rights to use of the land.

While there is no overall shortage of land in Solomon Islands, there is a shortage of good quality and accessible agricultural land. Most of the land is located on steep slopes and is only suitable for hand cultivation. Rapid population growth exerts a constant demand for additional land on which to grow food crops and for more intensive use of existing land. With no change in village food production technology and high population growth rates, the pressure on land will increase.

**Marketing constraints**      Marketing constraints—including transportation, storage and pricing—pose significant barriers to increasing food crop production and increasing rural income. The nature of the farming system prevents rapid response to sudden changes in market demand for food crops.

**Other constraints**      Other factors identified as constraints to women's higher subsistence productivity include

- an increasing workload for women as a result of increased pressure to contribute to the cash economy at the household level

‘The use of the best land closest to the village for cash crops has meant that women now have to walk further to their food gardens and work harder to produce the same quality and yield of food on marginal land...Women's rights and access to land for garden cultivation have long been a salient feature of Solomon Islands culture. Maintenance of women's land rights is now emerging as an important issue in parts of the country.’

- lack of agricultural innovations which could increase the productivity of the available land and decrease women's workload
- lack of money for acquisition of tools, seeds, pesticides and other inputs, especially in the more remote areas
- low levels of education, literacy and participation in training.

### **Projects for improving subsistence agriculture**

Hardaker and Fleming (1994) have emphasised that the smallholder sector will need to provide the engine for future growth in agricultural production, and that this is appropriate to other goals of socioeconomic development.

One of the few programs which specifically addresses smallholder agriculture is the Rural Smallholder Development Programme. This project, however, focuses on cash crops and therefore does not address women's subsistence activities directly.

It is funded by STABEX and European Development Fund contributions. Its objective is to create the conditions for the intensification and diversification of smallholder farming in order to increase marketed production and cash incomes in rural areas. The activities supported under this project are

- extension services through the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries' existing extension network
- staff and farmer training in cocoa and copra production
- on-farm trials and demonstrations
- farm input supply
- information
- rehabilitation and expansion of small holdings
- monitoring, evaluation, coordination and implementation.

### Addressing women's needs in the subsistence economy

Women are being denied access to important knowledge and resources, such as new technologies, better methods of farming, food cropping systems, marketing and distribution opportunities, and general advisory and extension services in Solomon Islands.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries has no specific policies for women in development, although it recognises the major role of women as food producers in Solomon Islands. There is an urgent need in Solomon Islands to

- direct more agricultural skills training and extension services to women
- research and develop crops grown predominantly by women, both for subsistence and for sale in the domestic and export markets
- develop technologies appropriate to the needs of women.

Both the Land Use Planning Department and the Livestock Department have an extension service network in the field, but no women are employed as field staff. The Women's Training Programme and the Women's Agricultural Extension Service Programme fall under the responsibility of the Department of Extension Support. This department, however, does not have its own officers in the field but works through a network of extension officers employed by the provincial governments. Women are very rarely employed as agricultural extension workers and the absence of female extension workers is a serious constraint in delivering extension services to female farmers.

Appropriate and effective extension services are an important element in improving agricultural production. In the nationwide consultation with women undertaken by the Review Committee in 1988, women consistently complained about the lack of agricultural information and extension services and the failure of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries to meet their needs. While the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries has undertaken some activities directed specifically at women and attempted to attract

women into their agricultural extension services, these attempts have met with little success. Concerted efforts are required to deliver these services to women.

The Dodo Creek research station is involved in a taro breeding program aiming to develop a disease resistant variety of taro. But the benefit of new production methods to women will depend on the effective dissemination of research results and the provision of support for women farmers.

In addition to agricultural work, women play an active role in fishing activities, however women's role in fishing has not been integrated into existing fisheries development projects.

The Women's Agricultural Extension Service Programme, funded under the New Zealand bilateral aid program, is a pilot program to create a female extension services network. It will be very costly to establish a separate extension services network and the availability of funds may be a crucial factor in the decision to implement the project.

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### WOMEN IN INFORMAL BUSINESS

With the growth of employment opportunities in the formal sector running at half the growth rate of job seekers, Solomon Islanders increasingly seek cash income through self-employment or other income-generating activities. The informal sector is also increasingly absorbing urban workers.

The participation of women in the informal sector is growing, with almost half of all women working for money engaged in self-employment. Income-earning activities which women undertake include the marketing of garden crops, sewing, handicrafts, basket weaving, bakeries, poultry and piggery farming and fishing. In the urban centres women are involved in catering services and screen printing.

Employment in the formal sector is not always compatible with women's domestic obligations. In Solomon Islands, as throughout the world, self-employment is easier to juggle with childcare and subsistence food production, and is therefore more appropriate to women's needs.

For many women income-generating activities or micro-businesses have become essential either because the cash income of their husbands or other family members cannot satisfy the basic needs of the family, or simply because they are the sole cash income earners for their families.

While awareness has grown concerning women's present and potential contribution to the national economy, very little information is available on women in the informal sector. In addition, very little is known about how best to promote their more equal participation in this sector.

Most self-employed women produce goods for local markets, but only a handful of women in Honiara export small quantities of shells, handicrafts and rattan furniture. The volume is negligible and intermittent knowledge of the markets poses major obstacles.

### **Constraints on self-employed women**

Self-employed women are handicapped by illiteracy and limited access to resources such as training, credit and marketing facilities.

**Access to credit**      Extending credit to women outside the formal sector is important, but the Development Bank of the Solomon Islands records only 10 loans to women out of more than 700 loans.

The absence of discriminatory lending policies does not in itself solve the problem of women's lack of access to credit. Banks are generally more familiar with large-scale business enterprises than with small-scale income-generating activities. In rural areas, women only have access to funds via grant schemes or credit unions.

Resources have been made available by the International Fund for Agricultural Development to enhance the training of credit union staff, providing a country-wide network of self-help financial institutions with a high rate of participation by women.

**Access to education and training**      Access to both formal and informal education is vital to women because it means contact with the outside world which builds confidence and creates capacity for a stronger participation in economic activities. Measures to increase women's access to both formal and informal education are urgently required.

## Profile of self-employed women

A survey of 323 Solomon Islands women undertaken by the Women in Development Division and Medical Services and the ILO found that

- more than two-thirds of women interviewed were engaged in self-employment and three-quarters spent 16 hours or more per week on their income-generating venture
- more than three-quarters of the interviewees were married, the average number of children was five, and one-quarter of the women lived in households with more than seven persons
- more than a third of the self-employed women were the sole income providers in their household.

The main types of economic activities undertaken by the women included farm gardening (38 per cent), food catering (21 per cent), crafts (15 per cent), and textiles (11 per cent). The survey also found that

- more than half of the women had received only a few years of primary school education, one-fifth had not received any formal education, one-quarter could not write in any language (Pidgin or English) and almost one-third of the women could not do any calculations
- more than three-quarters of the women surveyed had not received any assistance either from relatives, banks or other lending institutions and less than one-fifth of the women were aware of the services provided by the various government departments
- more than three-quarters of the self-employed women indicated that they worked on their own
- almost all of the women (95 per cent) sold their products directly to consumers
- almost all of the interviewees had problems with costing and pricing and about 50 per cent mentioned finance and the purchase of material as a problem
- one-quarter of the interviewees had difficulties with the production and selling of their products.

The need for assistance in the form of money, training and advice was stressed by almost all of the self-employed women.

**Access to  
marketing  
facilities**

Lack of physical infrastructure (roads and transport), market information and business training are the main constraints for marketing the products produced by women.

Currently, women have little information and training in the areas of business management, credit, trade entrepreneurship or innovations in production technologies and markets. As a result, male relatives often sell handicrafts and other goods produced by women, taking a large percentage of the profit for themselves.

Marketing systems are undeveloped and most women have little knowledge of potential markets, marketable products or the availability of credit. Without such information and training, it is difficult for women to become market-oriented.

Poor transportation and storage facilities result in the spoilage of large amounts of fruits and vegetables, and limit the range of agricultural produce which can be grown for market.

### **How government helps business**

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Employment is the government institution responsible for the promotion of registered businesses and as such deals indirectly with informal business by assisting entrepreneurs to make the transition from informal companies to formal small businesses or enterprises.

- The Foreign Investment Division aims to promote foreign investment in Solomon Islands by providing incentives.
- The Agricultural Development Cooperation program provides funds for Solomon Islanders who want to invest in new or existing agricultural industries.
- The Business Development Division encourages, advises and assists potential and existing local businesses.

Women and their families will benefit from greater support for self-employment and informal sector activities which currently receive little attention in national economic planning and investment allocations. Women require financial assistance, technical training and business management to enhance or to start economic activities to meet the cash needs of their families.

## Beneficial projects for women in business

**Credit Guarantee Scheme**      The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Employment and the Central Bank of the Solomon Islands have established a Credit Guarantee Scheme which will be implemented through the Development Bank of the Solomon Islands (DBSI). This scheme will provide a 100 per cent guarantee to loans approved by the DBSI, interest at a very favourable rate and financial assistance where raising security is a problem. This scheme could be useful to female entrepreneurs who often find it difficult to provide the security required by commercial lending institutions.

**Promotion and development of small and medium-scale industries**      Since 1989, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Employment has been implementing an UNDP/ UNIDO supported project called Promotion and Development of Small and Medium Industries. Potential female entrepreneurs are mentioned as a target group in the project document which also stipulates that at least 20 per cent of the assisted businesses should be run by women. Unfortunately, no expertise on women in business is available within the Ministry, and as most women are involved in micro-scale businesses, they fall outside of the direct scope of the project. The project proposes to set up a national consultative committee including representatives of non-government organisations, financial institutions, and the SICHE to promote coordination and sharing of information in the field of business promotion.

**Workshops  
for trainers  
and  
community  
workers**

The Business Development Division in cooperation with the Women in Development Division has carried out workshops on basic business management for female extension workers. Business advisers and project staff participated in a one-week seminar, organised by the International Labour Organisation. The purpose of the seminar was to coordinate business development activities aimed at women in micro and small business. Seminar participants included women development officers, non-government organisation representatives, and representatives from each of the provinces who produced a plan for assisting women in business.

‘Future development in Solomon Islands depends on successfully integrating women into the development process and addressing women’s specific needs in formal employment, in subsistence agriculture and in informal employment.’

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Women make a substantial contribution to the growth and development of the Solomon Islands economy. Women have most of the responsibility for subsistence agricultural production—on which the welfare of most Solomon Islanders depends—but the importance of their contribution is often ignored by development planners and policymakers. Women also make a substantial contribution to both the household and national economy through their participation in formal and informal sector employment, including self-employment.

In this Pacific Policy Paper, Marion Ward examines the status of women in the Solomon Islands and outlines the measures currently underway to address women's subordination. In particular Marion looks at women and education, employment, unemployment, self-employment and work in subsistence agriculture. She argues for change at all levels of government to address the status of women and provides specific recommendations on how to achieve full participation of women in the development process.

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