

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Gender, Politics, and (Missing) Data: Evidence from the Pacific Island Countries and Territories

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In the Pacific Islands context, women experience some of the lowest levels of descriptive and substantive political representation, as well as the highest levels of gendered violence anywhere in the world (Pacific Women 2021; Pacific Women in Politics 2022). These countries are also among those most at risk from the gendered impacts of climate change, which are already being felt (e.g., Government of Tokelau 2017). This much we know. Yet, despite the extent and urgency of gendered inequalities in the region—as well as the tireless work of local actors to address this—the gender-disaggregated data needed to address these urgent problems remains patchy at best, and outdated or nonexistent at worst. Even the most fundamental descriptive data lags behind global practices—especially where women, girls, and people of diverse gender identities are concerned.

We recently led the team producing a series of Gender Equality Briefs for 14 Pacific Island Countries and Territories (UN Women 2022b).¹ These documents aim to increase national-level knowledge and strengthen national systems for producing, disaggregating, and utilizing country-level gender-disaggregated data globally. The briefs are used by policy makers, donors, civil society, and government to advance women's rights and gender equality. They synthesize qualitative and quantitative data from publicly available sources, focusing on indicators of political and economic empowerment, access to education, humanitarian action against disasters, human rights, health, and violence against women and girls.

Drawing on our experiences producing these briefs, this short article outlines the political causes of missing gender-disaggregated data, and the related policy consequences for donors, policy makers, civil society, and governments. The Pacific Island Countries and Territories constitute an extreme case of these dynamics, but the implications are global. We argue that the most marginalized women are least well served by official sources of gender-disaggregated data. As

a result, civil society and service providers are overburdened with the task of remedying this in addition to the wider challenges they face. This has significant effects for the quality of available data due to—for instance—low sample sizes and a lack of comparability across countries and communities and over time. Together, these dynamics contribute to a vicious cycle of resource deprivation for women and girls, particularly the most marginalized within these groups.

Intersectionality-Blind Data Collection

First, at the regional and local levels, the communities most affected by gendered inequalities (and intersections with other inequalities) are the least well documented by official data sources. This means that the experiences of the most marginalized women, girls, and people of diverse gender identities are further excluded from debate, resources, and policy making. For example, Fiji takes a so-called ethnically blind approach to official data collection despite considerable ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity (Kant 2019). This makes it impossible to analyze the intersections of these factors with gender and restricts opportunities for policy making that targets intersectionally marginalized women.

The limitations of policy making that neglects to do this can also be seen in an example from Vanuatu. The country's Family Protection Act (2008) aimed to tackle the high level of violence against women and children by criminalizing domestic violence, in recognition of the fact that many perpetrators were family members. However, the resulting legal framework excludes unmarried women and domestic workers. Furthermore, the last national survey on violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Vanuatu was conducted in 2009. Consequently, there is a lack of data to support evidence-based advocacy that could help push for more protections for women who are made especially vulnerable by their marital or employment status. In these various examples, we thus observe a vicious cycle of missing data, noninclusive policy making, and further exclusion of the most marginalized.

The case of the Pacific Island Countries and Territories highlights the need for gender-disaggregated data that accounts for diverse gender identities and expressions. For example, Samoa's Ministry of Women, Community, and Social Development's (2021) National Policy on Gender Equality and the Rights of Women and Girls 2021–2031 makes commitments to improve the collection of data on the country's four recognized genders: female, male, fa'afafine (in the manner of women), and fa'atama (in the manner of men). Despite being culturally recognized identities, fa'afafine and fa'atama are frequently unaddressed in policies and legislation. Meanwhile, Samoa's constitution does not explicitly list gender identity or expression as protected characteristics.

Lack of attention to marginalized gender identities and the intersection of gender and other forms of inequality is a particularly pressing concern in the Pacific region given its vulnerabilities to climate change. Pacific Island nations are the canaries in the coal mine in this respect. Although policies such as the Tonga Department of Climate Change (2016) Climate Change Policy recognize the vulnerability of women and girls and state that this should be considered in

planning and implementation processes, there is often precious little data available to properly inform such processes and evaluate their success.

Limited State Capacity for Data Collection

Second, uneven or nonexistent government systems are not always able to provide information or facilitate quality data collection and analysis. This can diminish the quality of gender-disaggregated data due to gaps, small sample sizes, and lack of comparability across countries and communities and over time. This renders the production of high-quality country-level and regional evidence on gendered inequalities extremely challenging.

In the Pacific Island Countries and Territories, for example, there is an acute lack of recent data on VAWG: data for national studies on VAWG in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were last collected in 2008–09, a full 15 years ago (Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2009; Vanuatu Women's Centre 2011). Niue and Tokelau, meanwhile, have no national-level quantitative data on VAWG (UN Women 2022b).

There is also a major lack of data on mental health in the Pacific. The data that is available suggests that the mental health of young girls is of particular concern. Among teenagers aged 13–17 in Niue, 29% of girls and 10% of boys surveyed in 2019 stated that they had seriously considered suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey, and 14% of girls and 8% of boys had attempted suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey (World Health Organization 2019). Similar research conducted with middle school children in Palau in 2017 found that 52% of girls and 24% of boys had seriously considered suicide, while 36% of girls and 20% of boys had attempted suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey (CDC 2017). Despite these stark findings, we have no comparable evidence on young people's mental health in other countries in the region (UN Women 2022b).

Similar data gaps can be seen regarding informal employment: in the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, and the Solomon Islands, the most recent data on informal employment was published in 2013. Using the latest data on informal employment from each country between 2013 and 2019, the average rate of informal employment in non-agriculture across the 13 Pacific Island Countries and Territories (excluding Tokelau) is estimated to be 49% for women and 46% for men (UN Women 2022b). In addition, there is a lack of cross-national consistency in the definition of key indicators of gendered inequalities such as labor force participation. For example, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Palau, and the Solomon Islands include subsistence work as a type of employment leading to comparably higher labor force participation rates, notably among women who are more likely to engage in unpaid subsistence work (UN Women 2022b).

In addition, where national-level data is available, sample sizes are sometimes limited and compromised by selection bias. For example, the Nauru Family Health and Support Study (United Nations Population Fund 2015) is the country's only dedicated national survey on violence against women. A sample of 500 households were visited, of which 386 agreed to participate in household

interviews. However, only 148 women agreed to participate, as women reportedly refused to take part after news of the study spread through the community. All of this amounts to an exceptionally patchy evidence base from which to form policy, despite snapshots of a wide range of profound inequalities.

Stretched Civil Society Capacity for Data Collection

Third, the limited capacity within governments means that the collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data is often added to the workload of already stretched civil society organizations focused on gender issues. These tasks place a significant burden on individuals and organizations in addition to their demanding advocacy and service provision roles, including running shelters and crisis centers. The workload borne by these organizations cannot be understated.

In Vanuatu, for instance, the best available data suggests that 98% of women and children who experience violence do not bring their cases to the formal justice system, and women in rural areas have even less access than their urban counterparts (UN Women 2016). The small minority who are able to access the justice system often rely on assistance with court fees, transport, and medical costs because of high levels of poverty and other vulnerabilities. Yet, as of 2016, the Vanuatu Women's Centre was the only in-country organization providing counseling support to women and children who had experienced violence from an intimate partner, family member, or non-family member.

Of course, it is essential that civil society organizations are afforded a role in developing policy and practice attuned to the communities and constituencies they serve. For example, the Tonga Leitis Association—an NGO working with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics communities—has developed a referral pathway aligned with the National Service Delivery Protocol to better support the needs of individuals who experience gender-based violence (Pacific Community 2021). Yet the multifaceted and vital roles played by these organizations are rarely matched by adequate funding or resources.

Conclusions and Implications

Combined, these factors contribute to a vicious cycle of resource deprivation, data deficiency, exclusion from development interventions, and further resource deprivation, particularly affecting the most marginalized women, girls, and people of minoritized genders. Because disaggregated data is missing, inadequate, or uneven on issues as wide-ranging as violence, health, employment, and the climate crisis, policy in all these areas risks overlooking the most vulnerable women, girls, and marginalized genders. This, in turn, risks further entrenching gendered and other inequalities.

Moreover, in the rare instances in which gendered interventions have been implemented, there is often a lack of data to understand whether these programs and policies are actually working. For instance, in Samoa, where teenage mothers

often drop out of education and do not return, the 2017 National Safe Schools Policy aimed to tackle discrimination against pregnant girls and provide legal protections from expulsion. However, more data is necessary to assess whether any practical change has been achieved in terms of combating residual educational inequalities for these girls (UN Women 2022a).

What is perhaps most striking is that while the Pacific Island Countries and Territories may constitute an extreme case of many forms of gendered inequalities and gaps in gender-disaggregated data, none of the dynamics observed in the region are unique. Even in country contexts where data collection on gender is comparably robust, quantitative evidence on marginalized gender identities and the intersection of gender and other structural inequalities is often less so. Furthermore, even in best case country contexts, the collection of data on the most intersectionally marginalized groups is often supplemented by civil society organizations with the fewest resources and greatest burden. This, in turn creates, important gaps in policy, which further entrenches inequalities.

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Notes

1. While these reflections build on this consultancy practice, the analysis here solely reflects the views of the authors and not those of UN women or any other organization.

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