

Social protection for women and girls in the Pacific and Timor-Leste

Partnerships for Social Protection

26 August 2024

Context and project background

It is increasingly recognised that there is a need to understand the intersections between gender and social protection to achieve inclusive and effective social protection systems.¹ The Australian Government's Partnerships for Social Protection (P4SP) program and Sustineo have published an [Annotated Bibliography](#) and [Evidence Review](#) outlining the current evidence landscape from available literature on social protection in the Pacific and Timor-Leste, including a short analysis of gender and social protection. This brief builds on this foundation, exploring the evidence related to social protection and gender, highlighting key findings, summarising the most prevalent voices in this field, and identifying areas where further research is needed.

What the evidence says

Clear recognition of the intersections between gender and social protection

There is a clear focus on gender and social protection in the evidence, with a strong emphasis on measuring gendered impacts of social protection and calls to make programming gender-responsive (see for example APCRWG, 2021; CROP, 2021; Delforce & Woyengu, 2023; Holmes & Slater, 2012). In the evidence, consideration of gender in relation to social protection almost exclusively focuses on women (and girls, to a lesser extent), rather than men and boys, or people of other gender identities.²

Of the countries in the region with publicly available social protection strategies/policies, all explicitly reference intersections between gender and social protection, often focusing on how social protection can be used to respond to the vulnerabilities and disadvantages faced by

¹ This brief is focused on social protection for women and girls, as this reflects that the main focus of gendered analysis of social protection in the Pacific and Timor-Leste focuses on the experiences of women and girls (rather than men and boys, or people of other gender identities).

² The [Evidence Review](#) (Section 4.6) includes a short analysis of the evidence on social protection for people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).

women.³ However, these policies and strategies are largely aspirational, identifying goals and plans to implement gender-responsive social protection, rather than identifying existing programs that explicitly prioritise gender equality or women’s and/or girls’ empowerment (Timor-Leste’s Support to Victims of Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence program is an exception).

Coverage and eligibility

Overall, women receive fewer benefits and less coverage than men in social protection systems in the Pacific and Timor-Leste (ADB, 2022; Anderson et al., 2017). One of the main explanatory factors for this gender gap is the predominance of social insurance (meaning contributory programs) as a social protection instrument. According to the ADB (2022), 56% of social protection expenditure is dedicated to social insurance programs on average across the Pacific, and social insurance typically provides coverage only to those employed in the formal sector. In the Pacific and Timor-Leste, women are more likely to work outside the formal sector than men, placing them in low-paying and precarious work which fails to make them eligible for social insurance (CROP, 2021). The expansion of universal government-financed old age pensions – seen widely across the Pacific and Timor-Leste – has been a key step towards better coverage for women, allowing older women to access pensions regardless of their employment history (Satriana & Attenborough, 2023).

Informal social protection systems for women and girls

Informal social protection systems (i.e. traditional networks of reciprocal familial and community support structures, or support from faith-based institutions) also have gendered considerations.⁴ In Solomon Islands, for example, women – especially visible earners like market vendors – face greater pressure to share finances through cultural systems of giving, undermining their ability to save or invest in businesses (Eves, 2017). This pressure to share financial resources was reported to undermine Solomon Islands women’s ability to save, to provide for their families and to finance businesses (Eves, 2017). However, because informal social protection networks are highly contextual and collectively generated, it is not straightforward to make a general assessment whether these systems benefit or disadvantage women across the region as a whole (Parker et al., 2017).

There are also examples of very positive outcomes for women in informal systems. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a surge in online bartering – described as a “social net and a modern twist on a traditional practice” (CROP, 2021, p. 34). A Fijian Facebook group set up in April 2020 by three Fijian women amassed almost 200,000 members in just a few weeks – mostly women – and facilitated non-cash trading (CROP, 2021; Finau & Kant, 2021). Similar initiatives

³ Social protection policies and strategies are publicly available for Fiji: [Social Assistance Policy: Protecting the Poor and Vulnerable](#); Samoa: [National Social Protection Policy Framework](#); Papua New Guinea: [National Social Protection Policy 2015-2020](#); Nauru: [National Social Protection Strategy 2022-2032](#); and Timor-Leste: [National Strategy for Social Protection 2021-2030](#).

⁴ “Informal social protection” is a problematic description as these social protection systems are often highly structured and culturally institutionalised, making “informal” a false description; however, the framing is applied here to mean that that these social protection systems function outside of formal market interactions. This is consistent with use of the term in the literature.

emerged in Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu, showcasing how informal networks can support women and alleviate economic pressures during crises (CROP, 2021).

Gender-based violence and family dynamics

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a recognised issue in the Pacific, with social protection programs potentially influencing household dynamics and GBV in both positive and negative ways. The evidence in this area is relatively sparse and more analysis is required to better understand these dynamics, particularly around the impacts of social pensions and disability benefits. However, there are still some noteworthy reports that touch on GBV and family dynamics.

Save the Children's (2023) gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) analysis for cash programming in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu found that cash transfers for women can improve gender relations and household dynamics by alleviating financial strain and can reduce other GBV risks by allowing access to safe transportation and accommodation (Save the Children, 2023).

Cash transfers to women can also result in perverse outcomes, causing increases in GBV and coercion from family members seeking to control this income (Save the Children, 2023). Payments targeted to survivors of GBV – such as the Support to Victims of Gender-Based Violence program in Timor-Leste – can create risks of further violence, discrimination and stigma (Save the Children, 2023; Timor-Leste Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion, 2021).

Furthermore, inconsistencies in household registration systems in Timor-Leste led to exclusion of women in domestic violence shelters from receiving COVID-19 social protection payments (The Asia Foundation, 2020). While informal social protection systems can offer support to women facing domestic violence, these systems can also backfire if the family or support network sides with the perpetrator instead of the survivor (Holmes & Slater, 2012).

Gender-sensitive design and implementation

There are a variety of high-level guides on gender-sensitive social protection design and implementation produced within the region and internationally (see for example, DFAT 2020; CARE, 2019). However, gender equality and women and girls' empowerment are rarely explicit objectives of social protection programming, even if gender is sometimes considered at the operational level. Case study examples of gender-responsive social protection programming, which can begin to form the basis of learning for best practice, are nascent in the Pacific and Timor-Leste. This indicates that design and implementation of gender-sensitive social protection is lagging behind the discourse.

One example is Oxfam's 'Unblocked Cash' project in Vanuatu, implemented in 2020-2021 in response to Tropical Cyclone Harold. Over 90% of the beneficiaries of this project were women, and it had several design features that were intended to pursue gender equality and reduce GBV risks (Tønning, 2020). These included:

- Requesting both husband and wife to attend initial distribution to confirm agreement on the primary recipient
- Providing discreet electronic payments to reduce the need for women to travel or receive visible cash

- Training of implementing partners in gender equality and GBV
- Engaging the Vanuatu Women’s Centre throughout the entire project
- Simplifying delivery mechanisms to improve accessibility of payments
- Carefully designing the monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning systems to understand gendered outcomes of the project (including GBV)
- Setting up a call centre as a feedback and complaints mechanism (with staff trained on how to respond to GBV-related calls).

Although this was a timebound and donor-financed project, the innovative approach to gender-sensitive design and implementation offers lessons for governments and other actors to draw from in their ongoing social protection programs.

Key voices on this topic

The Evidence Review identified 67 publications which included discussion of gender and social protection.⁵ Only 8 included “gender” in the title, indicating that gender is often integrated into broader discussions and analysis, rather than being the primary focus. The Evidence Review found that multilateral organisations are the main publishers on the topic of gender and social protection in the Pacific and Timor-Leste, accounting for more than half of the publications identified.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) was by far predominant with 21 publications, typically reporting on a measure of social protection expenditure – the Social Protection Indicator (SPI) – disaggregated by sex. Broadly, these SPI publications tend to focus on description of the gendered elements of existing social protection systems for women and girls, rather than providing recommendations or examples of best practice. Outside of the ADB, the main publishers on this topic measured by volume are the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), and the World Bank.

Within the documents identified in the Evidence Review, Pacific-based organisations had only published 7 documents on this topic.⁶ Within this small number of documents, there were a handful that presented strong analysis of social protection for women and girls, including a factsheet from the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (2019) which sets out 9 general and 25 specific recommendations for gender-responsive social protection in Fiji.

While publisher data is a crude metric, it may signal that there is a lack of locally-driven research on the topic of social protection for women and girls, and indicates that the evidence landscape is likely to reflect the priorities of multilateral organisations.

⁵ There were 242 documents included in the Annotated Bibliography and Evidence Review in total.

⁶ Given that the methodology of the Evidence Review (described in Annex 1 of the [Annotated Bibliography](#)) only included publicly available resources that were published online, it is likely that some publications by Pacific organisations were missed, especially those published by local organisations.

Research gaps

There is a clear need for further research on social protection for women and girls in the Pacific and Timor-Leste. While there is a growing body of evidence on the gendered elements of current social protection programming, there is a lack of research on what constitutes best practice for gender-responsive social protection design and implementation in the Pacific and Timor-Leste. This forward-looking research is essential in supporting broad scale improvement in social protection systems in the region. For example, having an evidence base on the most effective ways to provide social protection for women working outside of the formal sector could offer significant improvements in social protection coverage of women. Building this understanding of best practice and fit for purpose social protection will require implementation of effective monitoring and evaluation systems that are able to effectively highlight the experiences of women and girls in social protection programs.

With the Pacific and Timor-Leste being highly vulnerable to the increasing impacts of climate change, it is essential to better understand the nexus between gender, climate change and social protection. Prevailing gender inequalities in the Pacific and Timor-Leste mean that women and girls are being disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change, and research is needed to understand the role social protection can serve in addressing this specific vulnerability.

Other areas where further research is needed include:

- Women and girls' experiences within informal and formal social protection systems
- How social protection can support women and girls' empowerment
- Impact of female/diverse policy- and decision-makers on social protection programming
- How disadvantages faced by women and girls intersect with other forms of vulnerability in social protection systems (e.g. disability, age, ethnicity)
- The realities of social protection systems for persons of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)
- How social protection can contribute to breaking the cycle of intergenerational gender inequality through addressing and correcting gender inequalities across the lifecycle of women and girls
- Linkages between cash transfers and family and gender-based violence, particularly in government-financed programs.
- The care economy and the impacts for women and girls, as well as how social protection could contribute to raising the profile of this sector.

It is important that Pacific and Timorese researchers are supported to lead this work, as they are best placed to understand and communicate the contextual factors which will shape effective gender-responsive social protection programming in the region.

Acknowledgements

This brief is an output of the *Evidence Review of Social Protection in the Pacific and Timor-Leste* project, supported by Partnerships for Social Protection (P4SP), funded by the Australian Government, and implemented by Sustineo Pty Ltd.

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