

Chapter 8.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to provide an assessment of women and development issues in Tonga. It has offered a profile of women's social, economic, legal and cultural status and endeavored to explain the links between women's changing roles and status and the broader dynamics of Tongan society. The paper has commented on some of the main features of women's subordinate status and the constraints on gender equality in what is one of the more socially complex Pacific societies. The overall purpose has been to identify ways in which the Bank might play a constructive and more gender-sensitive development role.

Many changes are taking place in Tonga today: in the social, cultural, economic and political domains. Integration into the world economic system, accompanied by material and individualistic values, is affecting society on many levels. The impact of commercially driven development is threatening the viability of the subsistence sector, notably the traditional sources of (marine and land-based) food and household materials that have sustained people for generations. Land shortages are acute and economic inequalities are growing. And, contrary to the established wisdom, both urban and rural poverty are emerging realities.

The winds of social change are also challenging traditional values, practices and institutions, including the cultural pivot of the extended family system. A generation of young people is growing up in a very different and, in many respects, confusing and alienating social environment. Tongans today face a more turbulent political climate, involving unprecedented populist challenges to the distribution and use of political power and authority.

The status of Tongan women today bears many cultural trappings of the past. In particular, it continues to be strongly influenced by an overarching quasi-feudal social system which vests control of resources and political power in an institutionalized (and predominantly male) elite. Women's subordinate land rights encapsulate the fusion of social and gender hierarchies, and these have more serious implications for their economic security today. Christianity remains a dominant force, exerting its influence on gender relations through the prescribed values of the patriarchal family and the controls on women's sexuality.

Yet aspects of women's status are changing, often in adverse ways and as a consequence of changes taking place in the development arena. As caretakers of the family, women bear the burden of negative 'fall-out' from development-induced change. They feel most acutely the dislocating effects of household violence and alcohol abuse, which are increasingly taking root in the country. Demographic change, in particular the high rates of external (male) migration and the rising number of female headed households, is placing new burdens on them. And as economic development becomes more market-driven, women are taking on increasingly important roles as producers and workers in key sectors of the formal economy, as well as in the informal sector. Alongside these trends, cultural institutions like the *fahu* system, which provided women with elevated status and rights in the past, are losing their influence.

Government support for a National Women's Policy and national women's machinery is an important achievement in the context of Tongan society. It provides a significant basis on which

to build a more solid and tangible commitment to improving the social, economic, legal and political status of Tongan women. The Bank is strongly urged to help enhance women's status, promote gender equity and move women from the 'fringes' to the 'mainstream' of development. This would be consistent with both government and Bank policy. Moreover, in view of women's key roles as resource users, household managers and custodians of the family, it would also help to create a better balance between growth and export-driven development, and development aimed at self-reliance and the satisfaction of basic needs.