

ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	-	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	-	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
AusAID	-	Australian Agency for International Development
CDTC	-	Community Development Training Center
CEDAW	-	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPR	-	Contraceptive Prevalence Rate
CRC	-	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CTG	-	Cardiograph
DEARC	-	Distance Education, Research and Communications Center
EPI	-	Expanded Program for Immunization
FPA	-	Family Planning Association
GAD	-	Gender and Development
HIV	-	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HWID	-	Ha'apai WID
IFAD	-	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MAF	-	Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries
NCD	-	Non-communicable Disease
NGO	-	Nongovernment Organization
NZODA	-	New Zealand Overseas Development Authority
PSSC	-	Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate
SIC	-	Small Industries Center
SPC	-	South Pacific Commission
STD	-	Sexually Transmitted Disease(s)
TA	-	Technical Assistance
TBA	-	Traditional Birth Attendant
TDB	-	Tonga Development Bank
TFR	-	Total Fertility Rate
UNDP	-	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	-	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	-	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	-	United Nations Development Fund for Women
USP	-	University of the South Pacific
WDC	-	Women in Development Center
WHO	-	World Health Organization
WID	-	Women in Development

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper offers an overview of the social and economic status of women in Tonga. It documents some of their main roles and responsibilities within the development process and analyses their principal needs, problems and concerns against the backdrop of social and economic trends in the country. The paper discusses the government's policies and programs in relation to women and gender and outlines the national machinery for women's affairs. It also includes a summary of selected externally funded women's projects. Finally, the paper proposes ways in which gender and development issues can be incorporated into the Bank's operational strategy and country programs for Tonga. It highlights some of the main problem areas that would benefit from Bank interventions and makes recommendations on how it could assist in advancing the status of Tongan women.

Consistent with the pattern of other Pacific Island countries, Tonga has a small narrow economy driven mainly by agriculture and to a lesser extent fisheries and tourism. Natural resources are limited and commodity prices suffer from low and fluctuating values in the world market. Physical isolation from the major markets and a lack of economies of scale are compounded by vulnerability to natural disasters, especially hurricanes, which can have a very destructive impact on crops and physical/social infrastructure. Tonga's industrial base is extremely limited and traditional export crops like copra and bananas have been virtually abandoned due to adverse economic conditions. The growing liberalization of trade has further undermined the country's capacity to produce these traditional exports at competitive prices.

Tonga's economic success story lies in the enterprising way in which it has expanded its agricultural base and boosted its export earnings by developing niche market crops. Squash and vanilla have largely displaced copra and bananas as the main crops. They have generated employment, boosted rural incomes and, overall, proved very lucrative. In the case of squash, small farmers have shown remarkable diligence and tenacity in the face of stringent requirements in the Japanese market. Other crops such as coffee and black pepper have helped to further diversify the economy but are still in their infancy. Unfortunately, these encouraging developments have not protected Tonga from the vicissitudes of the international economy and the country has remained vulnerable to fluctuating prices as well as to the insecurities associated with producing for niche markets.

As the backbone of the traditional economy, the subsistence sector remains pivotal to national development, both as a source of livelihood and social insurance for the vast majority of Tongans. It is also perceived as a buffer or safety net in the face of downward turns in export markets, prices or investment in the formal cash sector. The expanding cash economy, the shortage of land, environmentally degrading development practices and changing lifestyles (including deteriorating eating habits) are amongst the many changes that threaten the survival of the subsistence economy.

It would seem to be imperative that efforts be made to bolster the subsistence sector in the long-term interests of reducing the country's heavy dependence on foreign aid, overseas remittances and costly and unhealthy food imports. Finding a balance between the exigencies of an

export-oriented economy and the long-term needs of subsistence agriculture, agro-forestry and fisheries would seem to offer a more solid basis for promoting more self-reliant, sustainable and equitable development.

The status of women is inextricably linked to the highly stratified feudal order that lies at the heart of Tongan society. Although gender ideologies proclaim a social superiority for women (based on the cultural obligations of men to their sisters), their overall status is also shaped by factors other than their position as female siblings. For one thing, gender interacts with kinship-based rank to produce very different outcomes for women at opposite ends of the social scale. In addition, the (external and internal) forces of change are eroding some of the more positive aspects of women's former traditional status.

Christianity has been a major influence in both redefining gender relations (including the gender division of labor) and reshaping the moral values. The privileges women traditionally enjoyed as sisters have gradually diminished, giving way to their 'alter ego' as wives within the patriarchal family and as workers/producers within the cash-driven/global economy.

The declining status of Tongan women appears to be further compounded by demographic and social changes, especially large-scale international migration (where women are often left behind to manage as single parents), urban congestion (in Nuku'alofa) and rising poverty/landlessness. Women's traditional roles as family caretakers and nurturers mean that they are directly affected by a lack of basic resources like land, water and cash income. Poor living standards and poor family health have an adverse impact on their work loads, their capacity to care for their children, and their own health.

Tonga faces many economic and social challenges today. Gender issues should form an integral part of all efforts aimed at tackling these. In addition, there are many areas of women's social and economic status that would benefit from improvement, not only in the interests of women themselves, but the whole community. The Tongan government has already indicated its support for activities aimed at improving the status of women but much work must be done if substantive gender equality in all (political, social, economic and legal) areas is to be achieved. It is hoped that the Bank will support this process through positive program interventions, especially at the community level.

What follows below are a few suggested areas for possible action to address the concerns and needs of women in Tonga. Understandably, the Bank may not be in a position to address all the recommendations in its future program of activities. Nonetheless, a broad range of recommendations are offered as some may be of interest to bilateral donors.

1. Mainstreaming Gender into National Planning

The mainstreaming of gender into all government business, including national/sectoral planning and macroeconomic policy, is a central objective of the national women's machinery and is in line with international trends. Unfortunately, the limited gender capacity of the central planning agency and other government departments makes integrating gender into planning and policy work difficult. It is recommended that the Bank consider providing as part of its capacity-building assistance a gender specialist to the Central Planning Office under technical assistance to develop a comprehensive (gender-inclusive) planning strategy. This could be used as a guide or model by other government departments.

In addition, it is recommended that the Bank consider including a gender component in all its institutional strengthening assistance including the proposed TA to the Ministry of Finance.

2. Strengthening Women's Participation in Development

Institutional strengthening measures for gender and development would benefit from a broadly based, holistic approach rather than a concentration of resources in the Women's Development Unit. Building up the capacity of key line ministries/departments would permit a more consolidated approach to integrating gender concerns. It would also allow for a wider spread of skills, better coordination between divisions in development planning and policy making, and a higher chance of success all round. The process could begin with the Central Planning Office, Tonga Trade, and the Ministries of Agriculture and Fisheries in view of activities already in place.

It is recommended that any parallel capacity building support for the women's NGO community should be directed towards those organizations that either operate at community level or have strong links with grassroots women. In this way, the Bank would help to ensure that the development agenda for women is determined by the mass of ordinary women in the community and not by a small urban-based elite.

3. Women and Health

Health indicators for Tonga portray a generally favorable picture of women's general and reproductive health. However, women demonstrate higher prevalence rates for obesity and obesity-related health problems, notably diabetes and other non-communicable disease, which are leading 'lifestyle' killers. Hospital obstetric services are also plagued by overcrowding and a shortage of specialist staff, equipment and drugs, all of which are difficult to alleviate because of budgetary constraints.

Other problems include the paucity of accurate and gender-disaggregated health data, and the growing incidence of teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted disease (STD). Women are especially vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies and STDs because of cultural values that limit their ability to control their own sexuality and fertility. The Bank could consider supporting institutional strengthening for hospital maternal and child health services as well as NGO initiatives aimed at improving women's general and reproductive health status.

4. Improving Water and Sanitation

Water and sanitation are crucial development issues in Tonga, just as they are elsewhere in the Pacific. They are also fundamental to family and community health and for this reason are directly linked to the domestic responsibilities of women. Donor assistance is directed towards improving standards in both these areas, but there is still a long way to go towards guaranteeing an adequate and healthy water supply and sanitation system for the mass population. Moreover, while it is generally recognized that the increasing urban drift places an immense burden on existing water, sanitation and housing facilities, less attention is being given to the detrimental effects of agrochemical pesticides associated with squash production and other forms of commercial agriculture.

The Bank could make a valuable contribution by helping to finance the construction of water and septic tanks on the outer islands, hardware (piping) extensions and improvements to the reticulated water systems. It could also facilitate professional water monitoring, research on pesticide run off, and better regulation of industrial waste disposal by the private sector. It is important that women's concerns and needs are given full consideration from the earliest planning stages of any future initiatives undertaken by the Bank, such as the Nuku'alofa Urban Planning Development Project.

5. Women and Agriculture

Contrary to the traditional stereotypes and national accounting indicators, women are vital players in virtually all aspects of agricultural work, including commercial agriculture. These developments are taking place in spite of the special difficulties women face - by virtue of their negligible land rights - in accessing credit.

Despite these trends, women farmers receive inadequate extension support, including training. A major reason for this is the lack of agricultural expertise in the Women's Development Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The institutional strengthening of the Unit would be a valuable form of assistance from the Bank. This could include a scholarship program for women in agriculture and the preparation of a Women in Agriculture Master Plan for the Unit. Training in how to incorporate gender analysis into sectoral planning and policy making would also strengthen the capacity of the Ministry to integrate gender.

6. Women and Handicraft Production

Handicraft production is probably one of the most (culturally, economically and environmentally) sustainable industries in Tonga. As the most important single industry for women (claiming as much as 80 percent of women in the outer islands), it has helped to strengthen the manufacturing sector (which achieved an impressive 14.6 percent growth between 1995 and 1996). Unfortunately, shortages of raw materials limit the activities of women and, in turn, their ability to raise household incomes.

In view of the importance of handicraft production to Tongan culture and household incomes, and its export potential, the Bank could consider support to women's handicraft activities through credit and technical assistance for raw material production. It is also encouraged to help develop the marketing aspects of the industry. Marketing assistance could be mediated through Tonga Trade, which is already integrated into the Bank's assistance program to Tonga.

7. Women and Fisheries

As in other parts of the Pacific, women's fisheries in Tonga suffer from substantial neglect. One important reason for this is that national fisheries policy (and indeed ADB assistance) have been influenced – and circumscribed – by the priorities of the male pelagic fishery which has the more obvious potential to generate large scale export revenue. Women's fisheries, by virtue of their association with the inshore area and household/informal sector, are conventionally seen as less critical to development. As a result, they are starved of resources, training opportunities, and credit support; and the needs and concerns of women fishers are marginalized from sectoral planning.

The Bank is urged to reconsider its approach to supporting this sector. There is considerable scope for supporting women's inshore subsistence and commercial fisheries (including post-harvest business ventures and aquaculture) through technical and loan assistance; and it would seem highly desirable to extend private sector support. Assistance could be directed to capacity building for the de facto women's unit, including the development of a more gender-inclusive data collection system, professional training for women's fisheries officers, and the preparation of a women's fisheries development strategy. As a longer-term objective, the Bank is urged to facilitate the integration of gender into national fisheries policy and programming so that women's fisheries do not remain out on a limb.

8. Food Security and Sustainable Livelihoods

Although there is a strong tradition of both subsistence agriculture/agro-forestry and sustainable resource management in Tonga, food security is increasingly becoming a problem. Evidence of poverty and undernutrition is emerging in pockets of both urban and rural communities, and deteriorating diets are having a serious impact on nutritional and health standards. Non-communicable disease has reached alarming proportions and women feature prominently.

In order to promote health and living standards, and reduce the heavy imports of nutrient-weak foodstuffs, the Bank is urged to support government efforts to raise the production and consumption of nutritious local foods. Credit assistance to women vegetable farmers, support for the MAF Women's Development Unit, and a TA for the development of a national food security policy are amongst a number of possible initiatives. These measures could be consolidated by Bank assistance to the government's under-resourced yet valuable agro-forestry programs (e.g. in Vava'u) which are aimed at encouraging replanting of many multi-purpose (medicinal, food, cultural) trees and plants. Women are key players in agro-forestry, just as they are in the general area of household food/health security; and should be involved at all stages of potential initiatives.

9. Women and Employment

The lack of employment legislation and a shortage of employment and wage data are symptomatic of the unregulated labor market in Tonga. Tongan women are especially vulnerable to 'fall-out' from an unregulated workplace environment in view of their inferior employment status (including lower average earnings) and their special reproductive health needs during and after pregnancy.

The Small Industries Center (SIC) has been an important source of employment for women in the past, especially in the traditional female trades like garment making/knitwear. In the absence of employment legislation, there are no legal provisions covering occupational health and safety standards. In view of its plans for developing the Small Industries Center, the Bank is urged to explore ways of ensuring that adequate protection is provided to workers. It could do this by encouraging government to expedite enactment of the draft employment bill and/or by providing technical assistance to devise a formula for applying internationally acceptable standards to private sector businesses operating in the Center. Employment conditions, including occupational health and safety issues and a gender-inclusive employment code for SIC businesses in line with acceptable international standards, could be integrated into the Bank-sponsored Corporate Plan.

10. Women and Credit

The credit needs of women well exceed existing provisions, and gender imbalances in loan disbursements by the Tonga Development Bank persist in spite of women's better repayment rates and overall creditworthiness. A major constraint is the TDB's continued preference for land/property as security, which hits Tongan women especially hard because of their inferior land rights. Women's credit access is essentially confined to the planting of handicraft raw materials, and to a much lesser extent vegetable production. Few women are able to access loans for commercial crops like squash, vanilla or coffee in spite of women's increasingly important role in these sectors.

It is an opportune time for the Bank to expand existing TDB credit facilities for women and it is recommended that the Bank explore the possibility of a special window for women in any proposed loans for the TDB. Security conditions should be flexible enough to ensure that women do not continue to be disadvantaged by the legal and cultural restrictions on their land rights. Appropriate loan conditions would not only promote greater gender equity but would help to correct the current gender imbalances that exist in the loan disbursements of the Bank's own credit line to the TDB.

11. Women and Small Business

Tongan women demonstrate strong organizational and entrepreneurial skills in the informal and small business sectors and there are a few examples of exceptional successes on the part of individual women, even in traditional male domains like pelagic fisheries. However, as a general rule, women trying to run a business are disadvantaged by a lack of business management and accounting skills which can inhibit their ability to run their enterprises efficiently and profitably. Compounding this is the ubiquitous problem of accessing bank loans or other forms of credit.

A more enabling environment needs to be created for women who have the potential to develop successful business ventures. This is an area where the Bank could provide useful support, both through the provision of technical assistance for women's training in business and financial management, and by facilitating a congenial credit line within its ongoing loans program to the TDB. Both actions would be in line with Bank policy.

12. Education and Training Opportunities

Tonga boasts a strong educational ethic, which dates back to the early 19th century, and this has been reinforced by a longstanding policy of free and compulsory primary education and a generous (19 percent) budgetary allocation to education. The tendency of girls to outperform boys is one of the striking features of Tonga's educational system. Yet despite the superior performance of girls, they are under-represented in post-secondary/tertiary education and receive a smaller proportion of scholarships. There are fewer female enrolments into technical institutions and a concentration of girls/women in traditional female subject areas like nursing, secretarial studies and hospitality.

There is ample scope for gender-supportive initiatives by the Bank in this area. In particular, consideration could be given to facilitating a better gender balance in tertiary level education and improving women's training opportunities in core development areas like agriculture and fisheries.

13. Gender Statistics

Government policy and program initiatives on behalf of women (both at national and community level) are impeded by the lack of gender-disaggregated data. There are noticeable gaps in both the informal and formal sector: in subsistence and commercial agriculture (like squash), fisheries, tourism, manufacturing, business, TDB loan disbursements (excluding Women in Development financing), health, and certain areas of education. Data shortages and biases help to keep women's economic activity invisible and undervalued in the national accounts/sectoral reporting. They also inhibit the mainstreaming of gender into national planning and macroeconomic policy.

It is recommended that the Bank explore ways of improving the collection and analysis of gender-based data under its ongoing technical assistance program to Tonga. The gender database that has been installed in the Women's Development Unit could be usefully consolidated and expanded. This could then be used as a base-line resource for all departments. Bank TA should include a training component, which could be extended to departments like Statistics, Finance, Planning, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Labor and Commerce. Priority should be given to those departments (Planning and Agriculture) where institutional strengthening on gender is recommended.