WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
Evidence on the Relationship and the Response in the Pacific Region
Women's economic empowerment means that women have the ability to succeed and advance economically, and the power to make and act on economic decisions to enhance their well-being and position in society. Women’s economic empowerment is vital to realizing women’s rights, reducing poverty, and achieving gender equality across the globe. If women’s earnings increase and become more stable, other areas of women’s lives also improve—they can afford health care and pay for their children’s school fees, and they are more likely to play a leadership role in their communities. Women’s economic empowerment is therefore a win–win situation that can help not only women but also their communities and society. However, women’s economic empowerment can be both a risk factor for violence against women and girls (VAWG), but it also allows women to leave a violent relationship.

Rates of violence against women across the Pacific region are among the highest in the world. In several Pacific island countries, more than half of women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime, compared to the global average of 30% (Figure 1). Women and girls who experience multiple forms of marginalization are at increased risk of violence—for example, women and girls with disabilities, and people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

Women and girls also experience high levels of economic abuse and reproductive coercion. These forms of violence have been documented across Pacific island countries including Fiji, the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Economic abuse deprives women of control over their own income, directly hindering women’s economic empowerment and the ability for women entrepreneurs to make business decisions. Reproductive coercion—for example, a partner refusing to use contraception—limits women’s economic empowerment by impeding voice and agency and can contribute to girls dropping out of school due to early pregnancy and marriage, and an increase in unpaid care work.

Key points

- Rates of violence against women and girls across the Pacific region are among the highest in the world.
- Women’s economic empowerment can increase the risk of violence against women and girls, but it also allows women to leave a violent relationship—making good design of women’s economic empowerment programming crucial.
- Women entrepreneurs face violence and harassment at home, at work, and on their way to and from work, which restricts their income-generating activities.
- Violence against women and girls increases costs for businesses.
- Promising interventions address violence against women entrepreneurs across the Pacific region, spanning legislation, advocacy, and partnerships with the private sector.
WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Figure 1: Women Who Experience Partner Violence in Pacific Island Countries

Percentage of women who disclosed experience of physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner

- In the last 12 months
- In their lifetime
- Global average (lifetime)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>In the last 12 months</th>
<th>In their lifetime</th>
<th>Global average (lifetime)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cook Islands</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSM</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiribati</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall Islands</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauru</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niue</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palau</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papua New Guinea</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samoa</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon Islands</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonga</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuvalu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanuatu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FSM = Federated States of Micronesia.
Note: No data is available for Niue.
Increased economic empowerment can enable women to leave an abusive relationship but can also be a risk factor for intimate partner violence. Economic dependence is a major barrier to women in the Pacific region being able to leave a husband. In Fiji, a survey of 3,538 households found a complex relationship. On the one hand, employment and women’s economic empowerment can be a key pathway to support women to leave a violent relationship. On the other hand, partner violence can impact on women’s income generation, with almost half (48%) of women who experience violence saying their work was disrupted in some way. Women with higher incomes than their husbands are also significantly more likely to experience partner violence, suggesting possible risks for women entrepreneurs.

Research in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea in 2018 found that men use intimate partner violence to reassert their power over women enrolled in economic empowerment programs. In Vanuatu, women who have their own source of income are around 150% more likely to experience physical and sexual violence than those who do not. Making decisions about household finances in general is a major factor in family tension and violence in the Pacific.

**Economic abuse/violence** involves making or attempting to make a person financially dependent by maintaining total control over financial resources, withholding access to money, and/or forbidding attendance at school or employment.

Women entrepreneurs face violence and harassment at work and on their way to and from work, which restricts their income-generating activities. A study in Fiji found 20% of women experienced sexual harassment at work in 2016, down from 33% in 2002. Marketplaces can be unsafe, especially open markets in urban areas. Toilet facilities are often particularly unsafe, and women risk sexual harassment or assault when using them. A study of women fishers in Fiji found that 59% of interviewees considered the market a safe place to sell their catch if they have a license; and women in focus groups reported that they were sometimes harassed and threatened while selling their catch.
A United Nations (UN) Women scoping study of the markets in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea found that 55% of women and girls reported that they had experienced some form of violence in the marketplace, while 22% of female market vendors reported that they had experienced more than one incidence of sexual violence in the marketplace in the last 12 months. Safety concerns restrict women’s mobility, excluding them from participating in income-generating activities such as selling produce to exporters or working as agribusiness extension agents.

**Women employees are impacted by violence at home, which has high costs to businesses.** An International Finance Corporation (IFC) survey of 1,200 employees in Solomon Islands found that time lost to absence from work; being late; or feeling distracted, tired, or unwell because of violence at home totals 2 working weeks lost per year per employee. A further week per employee per year is spent informally responding to the impacts of domestic and sexual violence in the workplace, such as through ad hoc conversations. In Fiji, a study of three companies found 10 workdays were lost per employee, with 47% of all survey participants experiencing the impact of domestic violence against them or a friend on their work. In Papua New Guinea, IFC found that family and sexual violence totals 10 days per employee per year, costing companies more than $2.1 million per year. This cost was mainly due to feelings of anxiety, depression or shame, feeling drained, needing time off to attend court hearings, and feeling stressed because of the perpetrator’s jealousy toward colleagues. Data for six countries shows the significant costs of violence on women’s paid work, including disruption, inability to work, loss of confidence, and inability to concentrate (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Impact of Partner Violence on Women’s Paid Work**


---

**Box: Mitigating the Risk of Increased Violence Against Women and Girls through Women’s Economic Empowerment Programming**

A 2019 impact assessment of Rise Beyond the Reef, a nongovernment organization focusing on rural and remote communities in Fiji, found no evidence of increased violence due to their sustainable income-generating projects. Men and women instead noted that increased earnings had lessened stress and tension in the household, with 98% reporting more amicable husband–wife relationships. The program design recognized the ongoing risk of violence from the start, and had the explicit objective of addressing gender inequities and domestic violence. The initiative conducted a baseline survey in the communities to assess changes over time, delivered gender-based violence training, and created a community of “on-the-ground champions” to create a long-term community development approach to address gender-based violence and other harmful social norms.

Source: Impact of Rise Beyond the Reef in Rural Fiji - An Assessment.
Interventions Addressing Violence Against Women Entrepreneurs and Women-Owned Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Civil society organizations have raised awareness about sexual harassment and successfully advocated for workplace legislation in Fiji. After a study found that 1 in 5 women had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement initiated the “Not OK: Stop Sexual Harassment” campaign, which included publishing and disseminating infographic posters and resources on preventing sexual harassment. This campaign was part of a successful lobby to ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 190 (C190) (an international treaty on violence and harassment in the world of work), making Fiji one of only 25 countries in the world where the C190 was ratified as of May 2023.

Businesses and women’s business networks have a key role in addressing violence against women and girls in the Pacific region. The Papua New Guinea Business Coalition for Women is actively working with large companies to address VAWG. They have recently published resources on VAWG’s costs to businesses, developed culturally appropriate workplace policies and practices for companies, and provided training and support on these policies and practices. In Fiji, mWomen, a subscription-based short messaging service, gives free advice on women’s legal rights on VAWG. It began as a collaboration between Vodafone and the Department of Women, and by 2018, there were 25,613 subscribers.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Government of Australia recently completed the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (Pacific Women) Program, which supported several effective interventions for addressing violence against women workers and entrepreneurs. Pacific Women addressed women’s economic empowerment and VAWG simultaneously, funding interventions such as community awareness and outreach activities. As a part of the partnership with the UN Women Safe Cities program, the Meri Seif (Woman Safe) subsidized a bus scheme in Port Moresby and Lae, Papua New Guinea, which runs exclusively for women and girls. The buses have provided an estimated 141,902 women and girls a safe journey to their job, school, or the market. Further infrastructure improvements include safe accommodation centers and indoor toilet facilities for women vendors in Fiji and Papua New Guinea, which women report have made them feel safer.

Early signs show that interventions that partner with the private sector in the Pacific region are effective in addressing violence against women workers. Fifteen large companies in Solomon Islands, covering 6,000 employees, have committed to introducing policies for respectful workplaces under the Waka Mere Commitment to Action. An IFC survey has indicated much lower levels of acceptance of violence among Waka Mere employees than previous studies, suggesting the workplace responses have had a positive effect. The Bel isi project in Papua New Guinea has delivered family and sexual violence awareness training to 3,961 employees across 15 companies. There are early signs that the Bel isi project is making a positive impact. Staff who experienced violence in the past 12 months were more likely to receive paid time off, counseling, and a referral to a relevant service than those who faced violence more than 12 months ago. Staff also reported that there are more positive responses after disclosing to a trained staff member than disclosing to an untrained colleague.
Development partner policies, procedures, and guidance address unintended risks of violence against women and girls, as well as sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment in their projects. For example, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Government of Australia has a sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH) prevention policy as well as a “Do No Harm” Toolkit, containing resources to support organizations at the community level, working on women’s economic empowerment projects in integrating approaches to address VAWG into their project activities. Similarly, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank have produced a resource guide and tools for their staff for integrating initiatives to address VAWG within their work. Since 2010, IDB has had extensive gender provisions as part of their safeguards, requiring borrowers to address gender-related risks including gender-based exclusion and sexual and gender-based violence (sexual exploitation, human trafficking) and the spread of sexually transmitted infections. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has recently updated their environmental and social framework, which includes explicit reference to preventing gender-based violence and SEAH. ADB recently finalized a SEAH good practice note and toolkit, which will be piloted in five countries, including one Pacific island country.

Three countries in the Pacific region have specific legislation against sexual harassment. Only Fiji, Kiribati, and Samoa have specific legislation on sexual harassment in the workplace, while in other countries, workplace sexual harassment may be covered by criminal law or public service policies. There is generally an absence of comprehensive legislation on VAWG, particularly sexual harassment in the workplace, across the Pacific region.

Key Recommendations

The table below presents some programming and policy recommendations to further address VAWG.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas for Further Research</th>
<th>Programming Recommendations</th>
<th>Policy Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research on women’s economic empowerment and violence against women and girls (VAWG) status and trends for women from groups that have historically been marginalized more than others.</td>
<td>Invest in evidence-based programming that aims to shift harmful social norms that sustain VAWG in the world of work, focusing on women entrepreneurs and women-owned MSMEs.</td>
<td>Ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 190 on violence and harassment in the world of work and adopt and enforce sexual harassment legislation and policies in employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on the interconnections between VAWG and women’s economic empowerment for women-owned micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and women entrepreneurs, including discriminatory gender roles and how to design effective interventions.</td>
<td>Partner with the private sector to address VAWG for women workers in the formal sector.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women’s Economic Empowerment and Violence Against Women and Girls

_Evidence on the Relationship and the Response in the Pacific Region_

This brief summarizes findings and recommendations related to violence against women and girls from the publication Women’s Economic Empowerment in the Pacific Region: A Comprehensive Analysis of Existing Research and Data. It highlights the importance of strong program design for women’s economic empowerment, as such empowerment can both increase the risk of violence against women and enable women to leave a violent relationship. It outlines promising interventions and provides recommendations for research, policy, and programming.

About the Asian Development Bank

ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.