



Supporting women.
Defeating poverty.

Using Pacific Labour Mobility to support gender equality

In this submission CARE Australia¹ proposes that any future Pacific labour scheme be at least gender-responsive, with an aim to be gender-transformative — recognising the significant and multi-faceted challenges facing the Pacific region, and the opportunities offered by such programs. Current gender-neutral approaches miss the possibility of using the programs to embed lasting, positive changes in the Pacific and to provide mutually-reinforcing outcomes for investments in the region.

The broad goal of labour mobility through the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) and the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) is to enhance opportunity through increasing incomes, improving human capital, and maximising the use of earnings from labour mobility for women and men from Pacific countries.² CARE has noted with concern the ongoing gender discrepancy in the selection of workers to participate in the scheme, and have heard of employers seeking male only cohorts. Across 2021 women make up less than a quarter of workers in Australia.³ These attitudes and outcomes reinforce gender inequalities across the region, when there are significant opportunities to positively support both social welfare and work outcomes through the programs.

Role of gender inequality in driving poverty

Gender inequality is a key driver of poverty, so future iterations of the scheme have the potential to address poverty if they consider the gendered nature of economic inequality. Despite policy and programming to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and significant Australian government investment, women and girls across the Pacific experience persistent gender inequality. They are marginalised from decision making in both public and

¹ CARE Australia seeks a world of hope, inclusion and social justice, where poverty has been overcome and people live in dignity and security. Formed in 1987 by former Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser, and part of a global movement founded in 1945, CARE Australia has a strong focus on gender equality as an essential component in bringing lasting development to communities. The primary geographic focus of CARE Australia is the Pacific and South-East Asia where we manage all programs and activities of the CARE International confederation in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Tonga. In addition, CARE Australia undertakes development assistance and disaster response activities in another 17 countries in the Pacific, Middle East and Africa.

² Pacific Labour Facility Investment Design Document, 29 June, 2019, p.1

³ <https://pacificlabourmobility.com.au/media/>

private spheres and vulnerable to violence committed by men, impacting on their ability to access services and opportunities.

It is imperative development interventions, in particular labour schemes, recognise the risks around introducing resources or changing dynamics at household level. However, there is concern that the current structure of the labour mobility schemes are not working to address gender inequality issues. Increased access to resources within the family unit, or opportunities for women to access work programs do not by themselves address deep-seated inequalities. There is emerging evidence that programs promoting women's economic inclusion and empowerment, while bringing positive benefits, can also put women at risk of violence by men.⁴

Women's economic empowerment should not be viewed as a technical fix or a matter of filling gaps in access to resources.

"We must acknowledge that social, political and market systems are not neutral, but structured in a way that reflect and reinforce the societal inequalities that shaped them."⁵

Without directly confronting and acknowledging the issues of power and social justice — transforming the political, social and structural dimensions of gender inequality — gender injustice will continue to exacerbate poverty and hinder social development.⁶

Mitigating unintended consequences

A 2018 World Bank study found 'limited evidence to suggest whether a household's participation in the SWP is a contributing factor towards an increase in domestic violence as a result of changing economic roles of women

⁴ Eves, R. and Crawford, J. 2014 *Do No Harm: The Relationship between Violence Against Women and Women's Economic Empowerment in the Pacific, State, Society & Governance in Melanesia*, Australian National University, IN BRIEF 2014/3; Fulu, E. and Warner, X. 2018 'Literature review: Ending violence against women and girls', paper prepared by The Equality Institute for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

⁵ Emily Hillenbrand, Nidal Karim, Pranati Mohanraj and Diana Wu 2015 *Measuring gender-transformative change: A review of literature and promising practices* CARE

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and men' however, it did find evidence of unintended negative impacts on families in Vanuatu including communication breakdown, mistrust, conflicts relating to spending of remittances and irregular flows of remittances, and noted that these tensions are often triggers for violence in intimate relationships.⁷ This underscores the importance of better understanding the impacts of labour mobility schemes on intimate relationships, providing information, strategies and support to families to make informed joint decisions on managing additional incomes earned through employment, and ensuring risk mitigation strategies are resourced and implemented.

Research undertaken in 2017 through interviews with SWP workers did find evidence of attitudinal changes.

“When asked if their views about gender had changed since working in Australia, 68% of women and 73% of men said they had, with 77% of workers saying they now saw women as more equal to men. 86% of workers also said this had impacted their behaviour in Australia, and 80% said it had (or would) impact their behaviour within their families.”⁸

There is an opportunity to leverage these findings under the PLM schemes to address social impacts, by working with family units within the communities prior to and post-employment. CARE's work across the region has demonstrated that working on women's leadership in community based disaster committees, and undertaking gender equality training, the community as a whole worked together more effectively.⁹ Locally led partnerships can have a real impact to overcome long-term poverty.¹⁰

For example CARE currently works across the Pacific, with local communities, in delivering opportunities to examine family and community structures and culture with an aim to improve gender equality. In the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea CARE works with communities producing

⁷ World Bank 2018 *The Social Impacts of Seasonal Migration : Lessons from Australia's Seasonal Worker Program for Pacific Islanders*

⁸ Cardno, 2018 *LMAP Vanuatu Reintegration and Tracer Study, Report for Management*. Labour Mobility Assistance Program

⁹ Webb, J et al 2017 *Does gender responsive disaster risk reduction make a difference?*

¹⁰ Raud, W 2017 *Gender and Localising Aid - the potential of partnerships to deliver*

cocoa, to help reinvigorate the cocoa industry and improve the lives of farming families. Through targeted programming, women and men are able to understand the importance of giving women an equal role in decision making on the farm and about incomes. Participants come to recognise this is not only fair, but can also improve cocoa quality and yields — with cocoa production increasing by an average of three bags, the equivalent to an income increase of \$430. Household chores are also shared more equally, and cocoa cooperatives function more efficiently, thereby getting better cocoa prices for their members.¹¹ In order to be truly effective, gender equality programming and integration across the development program cannot be focused on just individual-level solutions — such as supporting a woman into training or economic productivity — “the achievement of gender equality is dependent on structural change.”¹²

Mutually reinforcing outcomes

The inclusion of gender responsive or transformative approaches in the PLM schemes can have significant positive impacts. PLM schemes need to proactively look to address gender inequalities, beyond words on paper. Current approaches could be enhanced. Transformative change means addressing the structural causes as well as the symptoms of gender inequality, with the aim of achieving lasting change in the power and choices women have over their own lives, rather than just a temporary increase in opportunities.¹³

Gender Responsive	Gender Transformative ¹⁴
Programming that challenges inequitable gender norms. Responds to the different needs and constraints of individuals based on their gender and sexuality. Opens space for discussing, challenging, and engaging with inequitable gender structures, systems, divisions, and power relations. Provides the opportunity for participants to	Policies and programs that change inequitable gender norms and relations to promote equality. Not only has the ambition to transform gender, but has the resources, willingness and capacity to institutionalise transformative programming.

¹¹ J Cousins, 2018 *BECOMES Mid Term Review Report*

¹² Kharas et al (eds), 2020 *Leave No One Behind* p 27

¹³ CARE International 2019 *Gender Equality and Women’s Voice guidance note*

¹⁴ Definitions drawn from *CARE Gender Marker*

question, experiment and challenge gender inequalities.	
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Greater gender equality is strongly correlated with greater peace and stability, as well as delivering stronger economic growth and prosperity. While the schemes are open to both men and women, women make up less than a quarter of workers in Australia.¹⁵ In looking to improve the PLM schemes, consideration of shifting approaches to be more gender aware and then transformative must be included, for the full benefits of the scheme to be realised.

¹⁵ <https://pacificlabourmobility.com.au/media/>

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