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***Violence against the girl child
in the Pacific Islands region***

Prepared by *
Shamima Ali

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

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I. OVERVIEW

1. Introduction

The popular image of the Pacific region is of a peaceful paradise. However, in

Culturally and linguistically, the region can be divided into three areas, Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia.³ The three sub-regions, while differing from each other in many ways, have certain socio-cultural similarities. One similarity is that all of the Pacific societies traditionally have a communal socio-economic base, traditionally characterized by reciprocity and sharing.⁴ Traditional culture is centred around the extended family and, in many cases, Christian churches.⁵

Another cultural trait shared by all three areas of the Pacific is that children and the girl child in particular, have very low status in society. In these societies status is attained with age and, to a lesser extent, through contributing to supporting the extended family by participating in traditional activities. Traditionally, children are expected to contribute to the family economy and compensate their parents for the cost of their upbringing by assisting with household and agricultural tasks.

While in the past the majority of Pacific populations depended on subsistence economies, and cash was a luxury rather than a necessity, today new lifestyle aspirations and, in some cases, population growth, have increased dependence on cash, and have led to rapid socio-economic change.⁶

Today, cash poverty and poverty of opportunity are growing in Pacific Island economies. Although rural poverty has been shown to be more prevalent in the larger Pacific Island countries such as PNG,⁷ urban poverty has created the most problematic social challenges in all Pacific countries, large and small.

Rapid urbanization over the past few decades has created a new kind of poverty linked to radical social and economic change: massive unemployment and

³ “Melanesia” includes Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Timor Leste. “Polynesia” incorporates American Samoa, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Wallis and Futuna. “Micronesia” includes FSM, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau.

⁴ Meleisea, P.S., 2004, “Cultural Values of Peace in the Pacific Islands: A Case Study of Samoa”, in Zhou Nan-Zhao and Bob Teasdale (eds), *Teaching Asia-Pacific Core Values of Peace and Harmony: A Sourcebook for Teachers*, UNESCO, Bangkok; Crocombe, R. and Meleisea, M. (eds) 1994, *Land Issues in the Pacific*, Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, Christchurch.

⁵ Fiji is the exception, with significant Hindu, Muslim and Sikh minority groups.

⁶ Most Pacific Island economies are experiencing higher rates of population growth than economic growth, which means that governments have difficulty in providing sufficient educational and health services to meet needs, particularly the needs of the large section of the population aged under 20 (which in Pacific

underemployment among youth,⁸ rising levels of violence and violent crime, the loss of community norms and subsistence resources. At

and sometimes harshly treated. This strict and sometimes violent treatment was intended to ensure the protection of a girl's reputation and a family's honour. For example, in Tonga and Samoa families were – and often still are – very strict with girls and restricted their movements in an effort to prevent

trading their daughters for cash or goods from transient logging and mining workers. In such cases, the father often conveniently overlooks other traditions and expectations associated with the bride price custom.¹² Furthermore, some groups within PNG who did not practice it in the past have adopted the bride price tradition as a way of demanding

smacking and hitting with a stick or other object was almost as frequently employed as verbal scolding.¹⁷

Violence is not only directed at children, but in many countries of the Pacific violence is seen an acceptable means of conflict resolution within the family, particularly when used against women and girls. For example, reports from Samoa and Fiji showed that violence between spouses, by parents against children and between other family members, was widely tolerated and condoned.¹⁸

In most countries of the Pacific, violent punishment of children is defended as being part of local culture. For example, an ethnographic study of childhood and the socialization of children in Tonga showed, violent punishment and humiliation of children is justified on cultural grounds by many Tongans.¹⁹

In all Pacific countries, discipline is considered a vital part of good parenting and punishment is seen as being for the child's own good.²⁰ Studies show that violent means of punishment are used because parents do not know of any alternative forms of discipline. For example, a study of child discipline conducted among Pacific Island migrants in New Zealand²¹ found that parents punished their children in the same way they had themselves been punished when they were children – with beatings – and were unaware of alternative means of discipline.²² Likewise, a recent report from Fiji noted that many parents administer physical punishment because they do not know of any other methods of discipline.²³

Not only do these findings represent common patterns, but, as country studies under the Pacific Children's Programme have found, social acceptance of violent punishment of children is so entrenched that those in authority, including police, school principals, clergy, and community leaders, often do not see the violent or psychologically abusive punishment of children as an issue of concern.²⁴

¹⁷ Pacific Children's Programme, 2003, "Community Responses to Child Protection in Fiji: Knowledge, Attitudes, Behaviour and Practice", Unpublished Baseline Survey

¹⁸ UNFPA, 2005, *Samoa Family Health and Safety Study*; Save the Children (Fiji), 2006, "The Physical and Mental Punishment of Children in Fiji: A Research Report", Save the Children, Suva, p. 8.

¹⁹ Morton, H., 1996, *Becoming Tongan: An Ethnography of Childhood*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu

²⁰ Plange, Nii-K, et. al., 2006?, "Pacific Child Protection Study: Overview report on child protection practice in Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa", Pacific Children's Programme; See also UNICEF Situation Analysis

5. Preservation of a culture of silence surrounding sexual abuse

Country studies indicate that sexual abuse of girls is only sporadically reported in the Pacific.²⁵ This is not because it rarely occurs but rather because in Pacific societies there is much secrecy surrounding this crime.

In Pacific societies, the rape of a child, particularly when perpetrated by a family member brings great shame to the family and, if made public, can tear families and communities apart. Furthermore, in small communities with little privacy, accusations of sexual abuse – no matter how valid – can lead to ostracism of the victim and her family.²⁶ In addition, in most countries because rape leads to a girl child being “permanently spoiled”, parents will often keep silent to avoid the economic devaluation of a girl who has been abused.²⁷

of reproductive health education and empowerment training of girls leads to them being at a higher risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.³²

7. Social change, internal migration and poverty

Although culture provides a context that influences the degree of vulnerability of the girl child, the most potent threats to girls in Pacific societies are not traditional but arise from aspects of modernity and associated globalizing influences which have led to rapid socio-cultural change, internal migration (including urbanization and male labour mobility) and increasing poverty.

A significant change in Pacific societies is the fragmentation of families, with fewer people living in extended families and in close-knit communities. People increasingly live in a more nuclear family structure and live more isolated from their communities. This change is having significant consequences for child-rearing. While previously the raising of children was a community responsibility, in this changed living environment the task is increasingly falling directly on parents, who are often unable to cope. Without traditional support mechanisms and without the interventions in conflicts between parents and children that used to occur when the extended family lived in close proximity, the pressure on parents is leading to increasing violence and abuse within families.³³

In rural areas and remote areas such as the outer islands, education and health services are in decline as rural populations dwindle due to urbanization. As dependence on money increases and the security of the subsistence economy diminishes, there is great poverty in these areas, which puts new strains on family relations.³⁴ In some cases, these strains lead to greater substance abuse (alcohol and *kava*³⁵) among males, which is believed by many to be a contributing factor to child neglect and domestic violence, including the physical and sexual abuse of girls.³⁶

At the same time, urbanization is leading to

In countries where resource exploitation is extensive, such as PNG and the Solomon Islands, there is high internal labour migration among males which have led to the establishment of rural enclaves where men live away from their families for long periods. These enclaves feed the expansion of markets for internet and video pornography that demean and commodify girls and women, and lead to a greater demand for prostitution and increasing cases of commercial sexual exploitation of girl children.³⁸

B. Consequences of vulnerability of the girl child

3. Low self-esteem and psychological damage among girls

As noted earlier, in most Pacific cultures, violent and psychologically abusive punishment of children is acceptable, and is often justified on cultural grounds. However, this acceptance of violent and abusive punishment, combined with the effects of socializing girls to accept discrimination by males, has negative consequences for girls in terms of low self esteem and psychological damage.

An analysis of community attitudes to violence in Fiji argues that pervasive violence in society is related to the high numbers of rapes and sexual abuse cases, domestic abuse, and violent punishment of children.⁴¹

Country studies of endemic family violence against women in the Pacific show that girls too often learn to accept the violent treatment of their mothers by their fathers as normal. Studies indicate that girls will, accordingly, expect to receive similar treatment from their husbands, thus perpetuating norms of family violence.⁴²

Violent punishment may be partly responsible for the high rates of female youth suicide in some countries, such as Samoa, where suicide attempts among female youth may be attributable to the fear of severe punishment that is meted out to girls if they bring shame and disgrace on the family through teenage pregnancy and similar offences.⁴³

4. Higher risk of sexual abuse among girls

The cultural and socio-economic factors discussed earlier, including acceptance of violence, a culture of secrecy about sexual matters and rape, a lack of education about reproductive health, urbanisation, higher rates of domestic violence and the shift away from extended families towards nuclear families, has led to higher risks for the girl child of being sexually abused.

In addition, the socialization process of girls in Pacific countries, which leads them to place little value on their own opinions, puts adolescent girls at high risk of abuse.

unable to say “no” to sexual advances, even when the male is not a “boyfriend”, but just someone she agreed to go out with and who then demanded sex.

In many Pacific societies, while girls are taught to respect males, particularly older men, boys are not taught to value the rights of women or to respect them as individuals. Society teaches them that if a girl agrees to spend time with them or is unprotected by a male family member, she is sexually available. Therefore even if a girl is able to say “no” to sexual advances, males are not deterred and feel justified in raping the girl as, by putting herself in an “available” situation, she has “asked for it”.

Therefore, when a girl is raped, it is often seen as being the girl’s fault. Girls who have been raped consequently feel a lot of shame and self-blame.⁴⁵ A girl who is likely to be blamed for being raped is unlikely to tell anyone about it. However, even when she does tell her parents, they are unlikely to

Fiji is a major tourist destination and there is anecdotal evidence collected by the study that some tourists visit Fiji with the main objective of procuring sexual relations with under age girls and boys.⁴⁸

Vanuatu also has a significant tourism industry, but so far no direct sex-tourism has been identified. In Vanuatu, commercial sexual exploitation of girl children is

The Constitution of PNG and the *Customs Recognition Act* allow custom to be overruled if it is "repugnant to general principles of humanity" or is contrary to the "best interests of a child under the age of 16 years". However, such cases are rarely taken to the National or Supreme Court for a ruling.

Other examples of conflict between modern and traditional law are the practices of "customary" adoption of children (in particular girl children), polygny, bride price and sale of girl children. Such customs tend to increase the vulnerability of the girl child to poor health, poverty of opportunity, economic exploitation, sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation.⁵³

Even where the law is clear and provides protection, girls remain vulnerable because of inadequate police and court procedures. In PNG, for example, police are typically under-funded, understaffed and under-resourced in rural areas. And, as a UNIFEM report noted, the justice system tends to treat crimes against property more seriously by than crimes of violence against women and girls, and magistrates often impose relatively short sentences on rapists.⁵⁴

An additional difficulty in prosecuting those who sexually abuse children is that in many countries of the Pacific the crime of "statutory rape" does not exist because there is no defined minimum age required for consent to sexual relations.⁵⁵ However, even in countries where there is a minimum legal age for sexual relations, statutory rape is rarely recorded.⁵⁶ A further constraint to protecting the girl child is that there is no official scrutiny of harmful "customary" practices.

A difficulty faced in PNG and Solomon Islands in preventing sexual abuse of adolescent girls is that they often cannot enforce the legal minimum age for marriage because only around 2% (PNG) and 15% (Solomon Islands) of births are registered so there is often no means of legally verifying the age of a child.⁵⁷

While there are active NGOs in most Pacific countries dedicated to promoting family welfare and the rights of women and girls, these tend to be under-resourced, donor dependent, and rarely have State support.

Many Pacific states do not have social welfare systems, and they therefore lack supportive institutional mechanisms to assist girls and women who are victims of, or at risk of, violence, sexual abuse and exploitation. Consequently, other than a few church-run organizations in some countries, there are no specific care institutions for girls who have been sexually abused. These girls are placed in orphanages and other institutions

⁵³ HELP Resources, Inc, and UNICEF (PNG), 2005

⁵⁴ UNIFEM, 2002, *Actions to end violence against women: a regional scan of the Pacific*, UNIFEM

⁵⁵ United Nations Survey on Violence against Children, 2005; and US Department of State, 2005, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices".

⁵⁶ UNICEF, 2004(d), "A Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women: Niue", UNICEF Pacific, Suva, p. 42

⁵⁷ HELP Resources, Inc, and UNICEF (PNG), 2005; UNICEF Pacific, 2005(c). Birth Registration in the Pacific, UNICEF Pacific, Suva.

with young women offenders and all of these girls are vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse because of their situation. The institutions that the abused and delinquent girls are sent to lack the capacity to make significant national interventions and they generally do not have personnel who are trained to assist girls who have been sexually abused. These girls therefore receive little comfort and advice in dealing with the trauma that they have experienced.⁵⁸

The situation of girl children is not on the women's policy agenda in most Pacific Island countries. Ten Pacific States have ratified or acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) but most have not submitted reports. The Pacific Platform for Action (PPA) does not include the Beijing Platforms of Action (BPA) critical area of concern regarding "Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child".⁵⁹ While all Pacific Island States have ratified or acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, most are struggling with their reporting obligations and few have a comprehensive policy or plan of action for children, let alone one which specifically addresses the situation of the girl child.

The omission of the girl child from most national plans of action for women reflects both the tendency to see women's issues as being separate from those of the girl child, and also the prevailing culture of denial in Pacific Island States concerning abuse of children's rights, especially the rights of girl children.

IV. TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT OF THE GIRL CHILD

While the situation of the girl child has been a largely neglected issue in Pacific Island countries, except by United Nations agencies and a handful of NGOs, recent studies have begun to bring the need for protection of girl children to the forefront and work to place girl children on national agendas for social development⁶⁰.

Country and regional studies show that there is no single answer applicable to every country due to the differences between countries in terms of development, culture, governance and the effectiveness of public policy. However country and regional situation reports recommend the actions outlined below.

⁵⁸ Source: Communication from Edwina Kotoisuva, Deputy Coordinator, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC).

⁵⁹ The PPA does not include the BPA critical areas of concern regarding "Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially the media"; and, "Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child". The Beijing platform does not include the PPA critical areas of concern: "Agriculture and fisheries", "Culture and the family"; and "Indigenous people's rights".

⁶⁰ Studies sponsored by UNICEF, UNIFEM, Save the Children, AusAID, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (and its regional program), the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), the Pacific Women's Bureau and the gender program within the Pacific Forum Secretariat, with the cooperation of many Pacific government departments of women, social welfare, community affairs, justice and police, and national NGOs.

1. Promote compliance with International Standards on rights of girls and women

The United Nations, in its policy dialogue with Pacific states, should encourage all Pacific states to become compliant State Parties to international commitments such as CEDAW, the Convention of the Rights of The Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocols; and the Stockholm Declaration; further:

Encouragement should be given for State Parties to accede to complementary Conventions such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Convention against Torture (CAT).

Those countries who have not completed CEDAW reports or CRC reports should be assisted to do so.

Assistance should be provided to train a competent government official in each country to oversee and advise government on international standards of human rights, to make reports as necessary, and to advise on international standards regarding human rights for public education.

2. Raise public awareness of the issues

The studies of the situation of children and the girl child in the Pacific show that public attitudes of denial or indifference, or misapprehension of affective modes of child discipline underlie many of the vulnerabilities of the girl child. The following measures are needed:

Public education campaigns targeting the clergy and church organizations, school teachers and law-makers, law enforcement agencies and parents.

Community-based prevention programmes, including parenting-skills training, and education in child development and in non-violent and non-abusive methods of child discipline.

Promotion of non-violence as a cultural value using existing community institutions, structures and linkages.

Meaningful consultation with children and young people, particularly girl children, to plan and implement strategies to address violence and discrimination against the girl child.

3. Conduct legislative review and reform

While the laws of Pacific Island States provide some protection for the girl child with respect to sexual offences, the protection is not wholly adequate. Sexual offences

against girls are often ill-defined (such as the definition of rape⁶¹) and most laws do not provide children with protection against commercial sexual exploitation, such as prostitution or child pornography. Unlike the law in New Zealand and in some states of Australia, the laws of most Pacific States do not specifically address violence or psychological abuse of children, and some countries do not address labour exploitation of children. Where relevant legislation exists, offences are massively underreported, in part to due to public attitudes that conceal the abuse of girls. In some countries poor governance and law enforcement means that those offences that are reported are inadequately dealt with.

A number of measures are urgently needed, including review and reform of legislative provisions for the protection of girls and women to ensure consistency with international standards. Issues which require urgent review are:

- Birth registration.
- Age of marriage and legal sexual consent for girls.
- Subordination of customary laws on marriage to constitutional law and human rights law.
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Gender-sensitive and child sensitive court proceedings.

Identification and appointment of

Revise curricula in formal education to include training in reproductive health, family life, legal and human rights awareness, and good citizenship.

7. Encourage donor support

The vulnerabilities of the girl child tend to be submerged in wider issues of gender inequality and programmes of action for women, and require special focus. Donors and technical assistance agencies should seek out and support specific initiatives for the protection of the girl child. Donors should include at least one programme of action to empower the girl child within their programmes of assistance.

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