

Gender Profile Kiribati

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|--|----------|
| Gender Context | 3 |
| Gender Issues | 4 |
| <i>Women in Decision Making</i> | 4 |
| <i>Violence Against Women</i> | 4 |
| <i>Unequal access to Productive and Economic Resources</i> | 4 |
| <i>Gender and Development</i> | 5 |
| Sectors | 5 |
| <i>Health</i> | 5 |
| <i>Education</i> | 6 |
| <i>Water and Sanitation</i> | 6 |
| <i>Transport and Infrastructure</i> | 7 |
| Institutional and Legal Framework | 7 |
| <i>Actors</i> | 8 |
| Recommendations | 8 |

Gender Context

Gender outcomes in Kiribati are mixed, with good representation of girls in school and a strong legislative framework, but relatively high maternal mortality and low representation of women in the formal economy. Historically and traditionally, Kiribati society is essentially patrilineal. Gender roles are still quite strictly defined and are often cited as a factor justifying negative notions in the treatment of women. Notwithstanding that in recent years, awareness of women's human rights issues, in particular the issue of violence against women has gained increasing momentum in both public and private realms, sensitivity around the issue is still a predominant factor which stifles open and frank discussion. The protection of women has been placed on the political agenda. Extensive work is still needed to guarantee adequate legal and judicial frameworks to facilitate this protection.

The 2005 census showed the population of 92,533 with more females (46,921) than males (45,612) and a young population with 37% under the age of 15 years. Life expectancy at birth is 63.1yrs for females and 58.9 for males with those on outer island living longer (62yrs vs 60yrs).

The breakdown of the family support structure is having an impact on i-Kiribati society, particularly on young people in South Tarawa with an increase in crime, drug abuse, violence and suicide and incidences of diseases like HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI). There is high unemployment rate due to high school dropout rates and limited opportunities available. While men dominate most of the cash work, the involvement of women in paid employment is growing. However, there is still a need for more investment in facilities and infrastructure that will help women generate the cash they require to meet family and social needs.¹

Although the status of women in Kiribati is changing, they are generally treated as subordinate to men. Women can inherit or own land in i-Kiribati tradition, but they usually still have less access to modern types of resources. The position of a woman in i-Kiribati society is largely defined by her age and marital status. A married woman with children has prestige but her husband holds considerable authority over her and this has much bearing on the freedom she can exercise to take part in activities. There are many restrictions on women's movements to safeguard their reputation, in line with traditional values regarding chastity.² Generally women's reproductive health rights are further limited by religion and culture. Due to increasing urban drift, living conditions on South Tarawa are worse than outer islands with problems of overcrowding contributing to the stresses faced by women and girls. According to Kiribati's latest MDG Progress Report (2007) the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector has maintained good gradual growth. In 1990 it reached 51%, and increased by 9% in 1995 reaching 60%. In 2000 it remained steady at the same figure and rose by 5% in 2005 making the total share of waged employment at 65%. Concerns have been raised about girls as young as 14 being exploited and subject to sex trafficking within the country.³

¹A situation analysis of Women, Children and Youth, Government of Kiribati, 2005

²ibid

³ <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4fe30cba48.html>

Gender Issues

Women in Decision Making

Women's participation in politics is a good indicator of women's participation in public affairs and their empowerment. The proportion of seats held by women has been zero for over the eighteen year period from 1990 to 2006. Despite silent years between 1993 and 1998 the seats for women in national parliament have been occupied by women from 1999 to 2001 at a percentage below 5%, which rose to a steady, 5%, from 2002 to 2005. The current percentage is 8.7 with now 4 women elected in the 2011 elections with 2 holding ministerial portfolios.

From 2006 to date there has been a very encouraging increase in women's participation in national parliament reaching 10% in 2007, and there is evidence based on the increase in number of women candidates that this trend is likely to increase further. Moreover, although this indicator is for seats held by women in national parliaments, depending on contexts, an increasing number of women are holding top Government positions including secretaries to ministries and CEO to statutory bodies and in other decision-making bodies where women's voices can be heard.⁴

Violence Against Women

The Kiribati Family Health Survey shows that violence against women is prevalent with the findings indicating that two in three (68%) every partnered women reported experiencing physical or sexual violence or both by an intimate partner. Physical violence was more common than sexual violence, although there was also significant overlap between these two forms of violence. That is most women who were experiencing physical violence by an intimate partner were also experiencing sexual violence. Generally the levels of intimate partner violence were higher in South Tarawa than in the outer islands, which could relate to the greater availability of alcohol and the existence of more social problems such as unemployment. In December, 2013, Parliament unanimously passed the Family Safety Bill criminalizing domestic violence. SPC RRRT has further assisted Kiribati with the development of an Implementation Strategy for the Family Safety Act. Another related law is the Child Welfare and Protection Bill. Kiribati is one of the few countries with a comprehensive policy on ending violence against women.

Unequal access to Productive and Economic Resources

Women's work is at the heart of the traditional economy that plays an important redistributive and welfare role in Kiribati communities. The growing demand for cash to pay for modern goods, education and church activities translates into increasing demands on women's time. Women raise money through a number of traditional mechanisms such as informal credit unions schemes, such as tekarekare (informal cooperatives) as well as tetarau (buying on credit) and tebututi (requesting or borrowing goods or money, land children and so on) in order to meet social obligations. Bingo games are another popular way to raise funds for church or community activities. There are not many opportunities to raise money outside of cash employment, and this is a significant part of the poverty of opportunity that women face.⁵

⁴ Kiribati Millennium Development Goals Progress report, 2007

⁵ibid

According to the Kiribati Demographic Health Survey 2009 the number of working men and women was very similar, with slightly more than 55% of currently married men and 54% of currently married women employed in the year prior to the Kiribati 2009 DHS. Most people were paid in cash. Women were more than twice as likely as men to work but not receive payment. More than one third of all working married women reported earning less than their husband or partner and one quarter of working married women reported that their partner does not bring in any money. As a woman gets older and has more children, her likelihood of earning more money than her husband decreases. Most currently married i-Kiribati women do not make house-hold decisions themselves. One quarter of the women surveyed reported that they have no say in any of the decisions related to household purchases, visits to their family or their own health care. Women in rural areas are less likely than those living in urban areas to participate in decision-making.

Gender and Development

Government efforts to improve the welfare of women had been coordinated up until 2012 through the Ministry of Internal and Social Affairs (having been transferred from the Ministry of Environment and Social Development in 2004). The Women's Affairs Unit was established within MESD and MISA until 2012 when Kiribati passed a bill for the establishment of a Ministry for Women, Youth and Social Affairs. Kiribati ratified CEDAW in April 2004. Kiribati's initial CEDAW report has been compiled, in draft form awaiting Government endorsement before it's submission. Capacity constraints are one of the main reasons for the delay in complying with the states reporting obligations. The compilation of the CEDAW report was facilitated with funding from UN Women and technical assistance by SPC RRRT. The report is now long overdue and there is a likelihood that the UN CEDAW Committee will set a date for Kiribati's report. In the absence of a report by the state/AMAK a NGO working on women's human rights compiled a shadow report, yet to be collectively endorsed by NGOs. The government acknowledges that there are a number of areas in Kiribati domestic laws that are not in compliance with CEDAW.

Sectors

Health

According to the 2013 Regional MDGs Tracking Report there is a high incidence of STIs, poor self-referral for treatment, and low condom use, a worrying combination of factors for potential HIV transmission. At present it is difficult to gauge the accurate level of maternal death as data needs to be strengthened in this area. Teen birth rate is high, with low contraceptive prevalence and evidence of an unmet need for family planning, which is 28%. Antenatal coverage is around 88% %. A broad range of reproductive health services are available but culture, tradition and religious view are a major barrier of women's access, particularly in outer islands.

Kiribati faces a high incidence of infectious disease, a dramatic increase of non-communicable diseases and mainly on South Tarawa a large number of traffic accidents. Non-communicable diseases, in particular heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and cancer are becoming more prevalent and this is contributing to increased hardship in the community and higher health service costs. Most of the increase in non-communicable diseases arises from poor nutrition. Communicable diseases like acute respiratory infections and diarrhoea are common. Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS

are on the rise becoming a cause for concern for Government. In between 1992 and 2003 there were 43 recorded cases of HIV, with 10 deaths from AIDS. The main route for infection into Kiribati has evidently been the many men who work overseas and who infect their wives and partners through heterosexual contact.⁶ Medical services is provided free by Government and consists of 85 health centers/clinics on outer islands staffed by medical assistants and/or nurses, and one referral hospital service on the capital island of Tarawa.

Education

Gender parity in education has been achieved with more girls attending high school. There is an emerging concern on getting boys to enroll and stay in high school with concerns as well over the quality of education. The Regional MDG Tracking report notes that the net enrolment rate is down but survival and literacy rates are up. Most primary schools (93) are located in the outer islands, with only 10 located in South Tarawa. Primary education is free and schools provide textbooks with automatic promotion for students up to Form 3. The fall in net enrolment rates is attributed to transportation issues, both in the outer islands and in South Tarawa. Also, due to lack of jobs, there is low perceived value of education, particularly in the outer islands.⁷

Kiribati is committed to the UNESCO Education For All (EFA) Framework and is working towards that through the twelve (12) EFA indicators that cover access, quality and efficiency in education service delivery. Primary School Enrolment Ratio is above 100% for the years 1990 to the early 2000s as shown in the existing net enrolment data which indicates achievement of universal primary education. However the Kiribati MDG progress report 2007 encourages caution as the figures could also be attributed to weak control of entry pupils of primary school age in the different classes, in which case this figure may thus be referred to as Gross Enrolment Ratio, which includes children of any age. It is also known that limited places competed for at secondary schools and above has caused many to choose for repetition and forging of age by children by parents and sometimes teachers.

The National MDG progress report 2007 notes that a number of children especially girls on South Tarawa and Betio are still being seen calling at various homes, public places including bars selling items to make money during school days. It is also common knowledge that because of their young age, a lot of parents actually drop off their children at schools and collect them after school at primary levels. However, at secondary school levels, most parents do not follow up on whether or not their children are actually attending schools and boys in particular would be seen roaming around in villages doing other things and on a number of occasions seen indulging in alcoholic drinks.⁸

Water and Sanitation

Access to water and sanitation is a constant problem in Kiribati. Concerns have been noted about the social and environmental consequences of migration and growth trends in South Tarawa which are placing extreme pressure on social services. A survey in 2001 found that most households considered poor sanitation, inadequate water supply, congestion and the social problems they encounter to be their main

⁶ ibid

⁷ 2013 Regional MDG Tracking Report, page 16

⁸ Government of Kiribati, Millennium Development Goals report, 2007

problems.

In a visit to Kiribati in 2012, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation, called on the Government of Kiribati to urgently address safe water and sanitation, by allocating necessary human and financial resources to a Government department that would be responsible for sanitation. It was noted that sanitation and hygiene must be improved in order to reduce preventable deaths of children. In order to fulfill i-Kiribati's human right to sufficient water for drinking and personal and domestic use, the Special Rapporteur said, the country must increase its rainwater harvesting and storage capacity, and reserve groundwater sources⁹ I-Kiribati traditionally use the sea as their toilet, and on sparsely populated outer islands this poses little health risk. On crowded South Tarawa around one quarter of households regularly use the beaches leaving the lagoon badly contaminated. On the shadow atoll soils, pit and water-seal toilets pollute the water lens. Efforts to promote composting toilets have not succeeded as they came up against cultural barriers.

Transport and Infrastructure

While Kiribati's remoteness contributes to transport and infrastructure problems, there is little documentation available on how these limitations specifically impact women and girls. Kiribati has received assistance from the donor community to improve transport and infrastructure at airports, this needs to be further examined from a gender lens to look at its impact on women and girls either positively or negatively.

Institutional and Legal Framework

Whilst Government acknowledges that much is still required to harmonize domestic laws to facilitate CEDAW compliance, measures have been taken to commence the process. A nationwide survey has been undertaken which provides the baseline to implement progressive reform, in the form of legislation, policies and programmes.¹⁰

The Constitution fails to protect women from sex discrimination with a referendum to change this recently introduced but not passed. Government has committed itself to advancing the status of women in the Kiribati Development Plan 2012 – 2015, by committing itself to the following outcome: Enhanced openness, transparency, accountability, gender equality and inclusiveness in the governmental and decision making process.¹¹

Government efforts to improve the welfare of women had been coordinated up until 2012 through the Ministry of Internal and Social Affairs (having been transferred from the Ministry of Environment and Social Development in 2004). The Women's Affairs Unit was established within MESD and MISA until 2012 when Kiribati passed a bill for the establishment of a Ministry for Women, Youth and Social Affairs.

⁹ <http://water-l.iisd.org/news/un-special-rapporteur-highlights-sanitation-challenges-in-kiribati/>

¹⁰ National report to the United Nations on the Universal Periodic Review, 2010

¹¹ Kiribati Development Plan 2012 - 2015

Actors

In local government, most Island Councils reserve a seat for a women's representative although women remain very much a minority on Councils. Women Interest Worker positions on the Island Councils were set up in the mid 1960s by the Women Interests Section of the Education Department to coordinate the women's activities in the rural sector including training workshops for women. After 1985, responsibility for recruiting and employing the WIW was transferred to Island Councils. Government has since resumed the responsibility for hiring WIW, but the issue remains of their often low status among Council staff, their often little training or experience and an unclear work program.¹²

At an island level, women's organisations are mostly defined by church membership and there is strong competition and little cooperation between them. Women's organisations do not, however, serve all women in Kiribati. Aia Mwaea Ainen Kiribati (AMAK) was established as a non-government organization in 1982 to serve as an umbrella organization for the various church affiliated women's organisations. Following a national conference, AMAK was dissolved as an umbrella organization and an arrangement was set up to integrate government and NGO functions. In more recent years, there has been a separation of function of Government and NGO with AMAK now functioning as an NGO and the Ministry of Women established to take over the oversight of Government's commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment.

- AGs Office
- SPC RRRT Country Focal Officer
- UN joint Presence / UN Women CEDAW Officer
- Social Welfare officers (MISA)
- Sexual Gender Based Violence Reference Group member Anne Kautu
- Ministry for Women
- National Disability organization

Recommendations

The Policy and Strategic Action Plan to EVAW in Kiribati has the following targets, which can be further supported: These include:

- Develop National Leadership and Commitments to Eliminate Gender Based Violence
- Strengthen Legal frameworks, Law enforcement and the Justice system
- Build Institutional and Community Capacity
- Strengthen & Improve Preventive, Protective, Social and Support services
- Eliminate and Prevent GBV through Civic Engagement and Advocacy

¹²A situation analysis of Women, Children and Youth, Government of Kiribati, 2005

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community is working with the Ministry of Women to conduct a gender stocktake of Government's capacity to mainstream commitments to gender equality, the recommendations of which can be further supported.

The UN supports a number of programmes through its Kiribati One UN Fund.

The Australian Government's Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Initiative has developed a Country plan for Kiribati with identified support over the next few years.

Given the extensive work that is already in place on the ground through the mentioned development partners, it is recommended that any assistance towards the work on Gender Equality be coordinated through the newly established Ministry of Women and the relevant sector. This will ensure sustainability and also will build capacity within the Ministry for specific sectoral gender issues and interventions. Support can also be provided for technical sectors such as gender in energy, gender in water and sanitation and gender issues in transportation, which appears to be limited.

