

Gender Profile

Republic of Marshall Islands

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Gender Context

The Republic of Marshalls Islands is a matrilineal society where the primary rights to land parcels are held collectively by member of the *bwij*, mother's clan who has the permanent authority on the land.¹ However men are usually delegated the authority to exercise and control these rights. Females in the chiefly class are referred to as *lerooj* and in some cases both chiefs and chieftesses have the same power and authority. chief. However, male paramount chiefs exercise much greater authority than female chiefs.

The 2013 Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report noted that the Republic of Marshall Islands is off track on MDG 1 Eradication of Poverty with rising unemployment and financial hardship in the outer islands. With an estimated 2007 median age of 19.2, as reported in the RMI Demographic Health Survey 2007 (DHS 2007), the RMI has the second youngest population in the Pacific. Teen fertility remains high². Youth unemployment is a particularly worrisome issue in the RMI. Every year, there are an estimated 1,200 new entrants into the working age population. While a large proportion of these youth are not technically in the labor force (e.g. some are still in school), many of them are able and willing to work, but unfortunately most of them are not able to find employment.

Overall women's economic participation is described as being low. While progress has been made in female participation in formal employment, the current estimate of one-in-three women employed formally remains relatively low and the male-female gap remains substantial. More recent estimates are not available. More women employed in the private sector but in low paying positions and it should be noted that there are only few private sector jobs thus limited opportunities in both the private and the public sector.

The RMI Community Survey 2006 survey captured data on families headed by females with no husband. In Majuro, Eniburr, and Jaluit, 16 to 17 percent of all families fell into this category. Of these families, on Majuro, Ebeye, Eniburr, Wotje and Jaluit, two-thirds or more of the female householders were not formally employed in the year prior to the survey.

The RMI Millennium Development Goals Progress Report, 2009 makes reference to the findings of the results of a number of poverty assessments done in previous years, one of which is the ADB Participatory Poverty Assessment conducted in 2002. The Assessment found that nearly all participants in the rural and urban areas identified themselves as experiencing hardship in some manner. In particular, stakeholders indicated that women were experiencing increased hardship. With many of their husbands unemployed, many women were becoming the primary breadwinners of their families, turning to handicraft production as their main source of income. Many women indicated that as handicraft production was very time consuming, they increasingly had little time to spend with their children. Many noted that income generated from handicrafts was only sufficient to purchase basic goods needed for survival, but insufficient to afford education and healthcare services

¹ Land and Women: The Matrilineal Factor, The Cases of the Republic of Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

² 2013 Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report, page 17

Gender Issues

Women in Decision Making

Participation of women at the national decision-making level remains limited, with women being under-represented in the legislative and executive branches of government. Marshall Islands has one of the lowest rates of representation at the legislative level internationally, with only one woman elected into the thirty-three-seat Nitijela, the lower house of Marshall Islands' bicameral legislature, since 1990. The twelve-seat Council of Chiefs (Iroji), which serves a largely consultative function dealing with custom and traditional practices, currently, has three women members.

Traditionally, women of chiefly rank had significant influence in decision-making processes. The Council of Iroji used to be composed of almost equal numbers of men and women. The influential role that these traditional women leaders have through the Iroji could be an avenue for progressing gender equality, especially in matters that relate to domestic violence and family issues. The Council of Iroji is also a forum where there is discussion on land use, natural resource management, conflict resolution and community cohesiveness, and thus it has a direct impact on people's lives.

There are a growing number of women in the public service, though men dominate the most senior positions. Currently, out of a total of ten permanent secretaries, three are women, who lead the Ministries of Health, Education and Foreign Affairs. Other important decision-making structures, including in the religious, private and judicial spheres are male dominated. Customary norms, stereotypes of women's roles, and the lack of public awareness about election processes limit women's opportunities to be appointed to leadership positions at the national level.³

Violence Against Women

Domestic violence is a challenge that is complicated by tradition, cultural practices, and a lack of institutional support and agencies to provide temporary relief or shelter. Traditionally, violence was dealt with within the family or clan setting. Through the process of westernization, this system has broken down and traditional forms of resolving conflict are playing a lesser role in protecting women. Victims now rely on modern systems to resolve conflict and apply justice, but lack of access and awareness prevent women from disclosing domestic abuse to the public.⁴

There is also a general attitude that abuse is a normal part of marriage and other such relationships. In a survey done by the RMI Statistics Department in 2007, 58 per cent of men and 56 per cent of women interviewed generally accepted that violence against women was a normal part of male–female relationships. Most widely accepted reasons for violence against women were neglecting the children (51 per cent), arguing with husband/partner (44 per cent), and going out without informing the husband (42 per cent). Almost a quarter (23 per cent) of women believed that denying sex to the husband and burning food were justifications for violence against women. Abuse in these cases included spousal violence, physical violence during pregnancy

³SPC Stocktake of capacity to mainstream gender of Pacific Island Governments, RMI, 2012

⁴ Government of Marshall Islands, UNICEF Pacific, Situation Analysis of Children, Youth, Women, 2003

and physical or sexual violence.⁵

A Family Health and Safety Prevalence Study is underway in the Republic of Marshall Islands expected to provide latest prevalence data on intimate partner violence. In 2011 RMI enacted the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act with follow up work done by UNDP Pacific Centre on costing the implementation of the Act which assess costs around the three main aspects of the Act, support and prevention, data collection and monitoring and the investigation and no drop policy

Unequal Access to Productive and Economic Resources

The RMI Millennium development goals report, 2009, states that RMI is not on track to achieving the target of full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people. While some job growth has been reflected in recent years, this has been mostly fueled by government. The growth rates of the working age population and the labor force are simply outpacing jobs growth, leaving the RMI with a large unemployed population (with unemployment particularly high among young persons and females).

The matrilineal succession of land rights gave women a position of great importance and influence in traditional society. According to custom, every Marshall Islander has land rights inherited from his or her mother. Today, women (especially young women) are less aware of their land rights and clanship relationships; an increasing population and migration make tracing lineage and land ownership even more complex. However, while the traditional culture provides women with rights to customary land title, and inheritance passes through the female line, access to credit or to registration rights are not guaranteed. In addition, the migration of many Marshallese to the urban centres of Majuro and Ebeye, and the consequent increased exposure to non-Marshallese values and culture, have weakened the traditional cultural norms and organization that were central to the society.⁶

Gender and Development

The Gender-related Development Index (GDI) measures achievement in the same basic capabilities as the HDI does, but takes into account inequality in achievement between women and men. In other words, the GDI is simply the HDI discounted (or adjusted downwards) for gender inequality. The RMI's GDI score in 2008 was 0.708, giving the RMI an 8th place ranking out of the 14 countries in the reference group.

In 1991, the Cabinet appointed a Women's Policy Development Task Force to formulate a policy specifying how women could be better incorporated into the socio-economic development of the nation. This Committee's first output was the National Women's Policy 1996–2001. Adopted in 1995, it was intended to accompany the government's second five-year development plan. Based on the principles of the National Women's Policy, the Women's Plan of Action 1996–2001 was developed. The plan of action covered areas of improvement in culture, traditions and customs; the situation of children and family life; gender equality in education; the role of women in community activities; health care for mothers and children; family planning; women and the media; land and other legal rights of women, especially women on the outer islands; lobbying the Nitijela for gender equality; promoting

⁵ibid

⁶Government of Marshall Islands, UNICEF, Situation Analysis Report, 2003

women in leadership positions; provision of business development skills and opportunities; and access to credit for women. The National Women's Policy expired in 2001 and there has been no policy developed since then, leaving no clear direction on priority areas or WDO's mandate. There is a need for an assessment of the outcomes or achievements of the policy and plan of action, and the development of a gender policy.⁷

Sector Issues

Health

Provision for sexual and reproductive health is well established, but the difficulty of access remains a problem, especially for women in rural areas and outer islands. According to the 2002 household income and expenditure survey, about 80 per cent of Marshallese women reported some problems with health care access, mainly associated with the lack of access to drugs and service providers, especially the lack of female providers, with 56 per cent of women interviewed perceiving this as a problem. Strong influence of culture and religion make it difficult for women and girls to openly discuss sexual and reproductive health issues.

Teenage pregnancy is very high. In 2005, teenagers accounted for nearly one fifth of all pregnancies. The teenage pregnancy rate (20.6 per cent of total number of live births) is higher than in most other Pacific Island countries. Teenage pregnancies not only inhibit most young women from pursuing further education, it is also an added burden for the extended families who, in many cases, do not have the financial resources to properly care for mothers and babies in these situations.

There is high prevalence to STI's, low condom use and low HIV/AIDS knowledge thus increasing the vulnerability to HIV. There are at least 13 confirmed cases of HIV/AIDS in RMI and the young population (under 34) is increasingly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. The vast majority of men (73 per cent) and women (60 per cent) have had sex before they turned 18, yet only 10 per cent and 16 per cent of 15—24 year old men and women respectively reported use of condoms at first sexual encounter. Some young women have also become involved in the sex trade through the tuna industry, exposing themselves not only to abuse but also to the risks of catching sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. Lack of opportunities and employment were cited as reasons for involvement in the sex trade.⁸

Education

According to the 2013 Regional MDG Tracking report gender parity in education has been achieved with more girls attending secondary school. The report states there are high rates of literacy though there is no progress on the net enrollment rate. There is an insufficient number of seats in primary schools, particularly in congested urban areas of Majuro and Ebeye which underpin a push-out phenomenon.

Data on male-female enrollment in different areas of study at both secondary and tertiary level is weak and this has been identified as an area that needs to be

⁷ SPC Stocktake of capacity to mainstream gender of Pacific Island Governments, RMI, 2012

⁸ibid

strengthened.⁹

Institutional and Legal Framework

The Republic of Marshall Islands has a moderate legal and policy framework to support the mainstreaming of gender and women's human rights across the whole of government. The government has ratified CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, although reporting under these treaties has been irregular.

The Constitution prohibits sex discrimination but there is an absence of gender equality and anti-discrimination legislation and no gender mainstreaming policy in place. To achieve a stronger framework, greater attention to reporting under human rights treaties is needed, and specific anti-discrimination legislation must be enacted. Much greater effort is also needed to ensure that the existing legal and policy framework is widely understood and systematically informs the work of government across the political, economic, social and cultural spheres.

RMI has endorsed a number of key international and regional policy frameworks containing commitments to gender equality, including the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPA), the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Revised Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality 2005-2015 (RPPA) and the Pacific Plan (2005, revised in 2007) and the leaders adopted the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration.

In 1979 the government established the Women's Desk within the Ministry of Social Affairs but failed to resource adequately it. The Women's Desk was later upgraded and renamed the Women in Development Office (WDO). A public sector reform program (PSRP) initiated in the 1990s resulted in a one third reduction of all government staff and the elimination of the Ministry of Social Affairs. This resulted in WDO being transferred to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Social Welfare (now the Ministry of Internal Affairs). Despite the fact that this move was intended to give WDO more prominence and broader responsibilities, the role actually became more limited and was required to function under the Community Development Section, where it has remained to date. WDO is the designated central policy-coordinating unit within the government for the advancement of women and government-wide mainstreaming of gender issues. The Women's Development Officer works closely with the Chief of the Community Development Unit and the Assistant Secretaries. She works by herself in mainstreaming gender, amongst other work.

A CEDAW/CRC Resource Development Committee is in place and comprises senior representatives of key government and non-government agencies. It has been given responsibility for implementing and reporting on the two conventions. The committee has been in existence for several years but had not been functioning well so, in 2009, UNIFEM (UN Women) and UNDP organized training and discussions with the committee members. However, there still has not been much progress in the work of the committee. There are no gender focal points across government departments to support any planned gender mainstreaming work. There is a Women's Training

⁹ *ibid*

Centre in the Internal Affairs Ministry, which has a total of three staff and focuses on the training of young women in vocational skills. There is no national human rights institution in Marshall Islands or other special mandate for the protection and promotion of women's human rights.¹⁰

Actors

WUTMI, the umbrella organization for women's NGOs, works closely with the Ministry of Internal Affairs on gender-related work and the organization is very strong in its community outreach and community capacity building work. WUTMI has branches on all the atolls and outer islands and so has links that are crucial to the full involvement of women in development processes. Work that WUTMI has been involved in includes training for improving parenting skills, gender and leadership programs, resource management projects, programs involving parents as teachers, and considerable work on violence against women. They have also done a lot of work on the development of CEDAW-compliant legislation.

Recommendations

The SPC Gender Stocktake identified the following potential strategic approaches for increasing the capacity of the RMI government to mainstream gender and women's human rights in an effective and sustainable way.

1. Capacity development and strengthening networks between all key gender actors in RMI.
2. Development of a National Gender Policy – technical assistance to develop a policy which addresses key priority thematic areas for women
3. Gender statistics – improved collection of sex-disaggregated data and specific gender indicators across all sectors
4. Assistance to Government for reporting on CEDAW and CRC
5. Budgetary support to implement the domestic violence law
6. Opportunities for women in the public sector and in senior positions
7. Quotas for women in parliament
8. Establishment of gender focal points in all ministries – to build capacity in each sector.

¹⁰ibid

