

# **Gender Relations in Pacific cultures and their impact on the growth and development of children<sup>1</sup>**

**By**

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<sup>1</sup> *This paper reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily those of UNICEF.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### General background to the region

The Pacific region is made up of independent Pacific Island countries (PICs), colonial territories still retained by France<sup>2</sup>, as well as island states with almost complete autonomy but retaining an associated status with New Zealand<sup>3</sup>. Pacific island countries are widely dispersed over the Pacific Ocean and vary in size, geographical conditions, resources, populations and cultures. Many Pacific Island countries are made of hundreds of islands, with national populations spread across many kilometers of ocean. Increasing urbanization is common to all island states, resulting in a higher proportion of many populations living in cities and towns. Seven of 15 Pacific island states have over 40% of their populations living in urban areas.<sup>4</sup> Pacific populations, however, are predominantly rural, living in isolated, often small communities, where family, clan, and village relations are the dominant feature of Pacific island life.

The movement in many Pacific Island countries of almost half the population to urban centers, represents one of the more significant changes in the Pacific island way of life, altering economic, social and gender relations in key institutions such as the family. Urbanisation over the decades has changed fundamental social conditions affecting men, women and children in the family, the household and community and at national levels.

Traditional Pacific Island economic and social systems have been in a process of change ever since European colonization two centuries ago, which drew the Pacific island countries and peoples into colonial economic systems in which production and use of resources focused on accruing benefits for the metropolitan states. Subsistence agriculture systems remained while plantation agriculture and the extraction of mineral resources were imposed, transforming land use and traditional concepts of natural resource use throughout the Pacific. Not all Pacific island states were colonized for their resources; others were acquired for strategic or political reasons.

However, whether acquired as colonies for economic exploitation or to prevent acquisition by rival states, Pacific island countries, under colonization, experienced profound changes to social relations and their way of life. Pacific Island countries and islanders were incorporated into new economic systems and came under external political control and colonial administration. The introduction of Christianity took place in this context and introduced many changes to how people lived, dressed, married, and brought up children. Christian proselytizing was part of the process of establishing colonial control.

Pacific societies and cultures experienced changes in land ownership, social relations and new or altered hierarchies, including changes in traditional leadership. Pacific cultural practices, freedom of movement of individuals or groups, use of labour, dress, social mores and relationships, were changed by European colonial beliefs about race,

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<sup>2</sup> For example, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna Islands.

<sup>3</sup> Cook Islands, Tokelau, Niue.

<sup>4</sup> **Pacific Islands Regional Millennium Development Goals Report 2004**, Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), November 2004, p.3.

ethnicity, gender, class and religion. Christian and European beliefs of the time, on marriage, the family and social relations, had a dominant influence on Pacific gender relations and concepts of key institutions such as the family. Most Pacific islanders did not escape the social, political and economic transformation brought about by colonization, unless living in isolated areas beyond contact and control.

When discussing gender relations in Pacific culture now, these changes have to be taken into account. European notions of women and property ownership, were some of the key areas where differences of perceptions translated into a lowering of women's status in many Pacific societies and appropriation of land resources previously recognized as owned by men, women and communities.

Indigenous Pacific Island identities, customs, beliefs and practices had resilience and endured colonial changes. There were many forms of resistance to colonization and the economic and social transformations of taking place in many Pacific territories. However, gender relations, concepts of the family, marriage, and attitudes to sexuality in Pacific cultures, were altered by introduced economic and social systems. New laws affecting labour relations, land and inheritance, marriage and customs in Pacific societies, changed men and women's status and gender relations. Many laws introduced in the colonial period and subsequently changed in the metropolitan countries of origin, remain unchanged in Pacific legal systems operating today and have entrenched gender inequality in the region.<sup>5</sup> These laws are the focus of Pacific women's rights advocacy for legislative change. Hardest to address are the losses of rights to land and communal decisionmaking that women traditionally held in many Pacific societies.

Religious rules and morals imposed by Christianity also set regulations on men and women's behaviour and revised concepts of the family structure and marriage, setting in place gender relations and relations with children, which have become part of what is considered "Pacific culture" today.

Pacific island states continue to be part of a globalised world. Their distance from the major centers of power and their smallness in size, do not remove Pacific Island peoples and cultures from the impacts of globalization. Pacific island economies continue to be integrated into the global economy by international trade and financial agreements now determining regional and national economic policies and options. Calls for Pacific Island countries to fully integrate into the global economy and change their economic priorities, governance practices, public institutions and national attitudes to work, industry and economic organisation, are constantly being made, (some as recently as today).<sup>6</sup>

Today, the process of globalization (economic, social, political and cultural) is affecting Pacific Islands countries and having impacts on social relations within the family and in Pacific communities. Pacific Island countries' national development policies, with or

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<sup>5</sup> See Jalal, Imrana P. **Law for Pacific Women: a legal rights handbook**, Fiji Women's Rights Movement, Suva, Fiji, 1998, for the most comprehensive work on the law and women's rights in Pacific countries.

<sup>6</sup> Advertisement in the **Fiji Times**, 30 September 2006, for a certificate course in diplomacy and international relations which will help participants "develop their own specific strategies to capitalize on those potential gains leading to greater integration of Forum Island Countries into the world global economy", [*Pacific Island Forum, regional intergovernmental organization*], University of the South Pacific, p20.

without arguments of their relative autonomy or not from the global economic system, can have positive or negative impacts on gender relations, social equality generally and income disparities within countries. Increasing poverty exists in many countries<sup>7</sup> and is a major problem also affecting gender relations in families, households and communities.

Political instability and violence, economic disparities between groups within countries based on ethnicity, provincial or political biases or corruption, and misuse and mismanagement of national resources by governments, are also affecting many Pacific island countries at family, household and community level. The problems of peaceful political succession, political equality and democratization in some Pacific countries, also are having an impact on Pacific Island families and communities, with gender-specific impacts on women and children.

This background is an important reference point for any discussion of Pacific cultures and gender relations. It is also important to note that there is great diversity in Pacific cultures, even within countries and that cultures change and evolve, rather than remaining static. Popular discourses in the Pacific on culture and social change often begin with the premise that Pacific culture is unchanging and needs to be preserved, or that social change (particularly changes in gender relations or women's position) will produce irrevocable damage to "the Pacific way of life" and culture. In reality, Pacific cultures have experienced profound changes for decades and will continue to do so.

Perhaps due to the relatively recent colonial past, or a political need to reassert Pacific culture to affirm or create national identity or maintain group identity, "Pacific culture" is often discussed as an unchanging entity from the past, which needs to be preserved or defended to ensure its survival in the future. Many claims about Pacific culture and the need to defend it, often seek to discredit a belief or practice as coming from "outside the Pacific" or reflecting merely "foreign" or "Western" influences. Children's rights and women's rights issues often give rise to this sort of response. However, in terms of gender relations and Pacific cultures, some of the most profound cultural changes and impacts on gender relations in the Pacific have already happened in the last two centuries – for example, Christian religious beliefs on marriage and the family, sexuality, gender roles, women's position in the household.

This discussion of gender relations in Pacific cultures and the impact on children's development and growth, looks at the contemporary Pacific and the experiences of children today. Pacific culture is not seen in terms of an idealized past or present – indeed it would be misleading and dangerous for children to maintain a constant cultural ideal, if it does not reflect reality. The focus here is on gender relations in Pacific Island countries today and ways in which gender relations has impacts on children.

## **Method**

This report is based on a desk review of materials on children's rights work in the Pacific by governments, development agencies and non-government organizations; also relevant reports by women's organizations and networks. References to women's traditional position in Pacific societies, their status, rights and current conditions, was separately researched, but for reasons of length and the need to cover critical issues facing children in the Pacific, a parallel presentation on women's status and rights is not

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<sup>7</sup> Pacific Islands Regional Millennium Development Goals Report 2004, p 23.

made here. The concluding sections of the paper will raise the issue of gender inequality and the connections between the women's rights framework and the children's rights framework, for consideration in children's rights work in the Pacific.

Key documents for showing the state of Pacific children, were Pacific governments' national reports on implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and national responses to the United Nations questionnaire on violence against children. These show national legislation and institutional responses to protect children and advance children's rights, but convey, with few exceptions, the current rather narrow framework of national children's rights work and child protection strategies in the Pacific<sup>8</sup>.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports on children's rights generally, its work in the Pacific region, regional consultations and national studies, show key issues affecting children in the region and in specific countries. The UNICEF report on Pacific Youth, conducted in collaboration with other Pacific regional and UN agencies<sup>9</sup>, provides a very good overview of Pacific youth and youth issues. UNICEF's national situation analysis reports on women and children in select Pacific countries, provide the most easily available basic information on key areas of women's and children's status, including maternal and child health, nutrition and education<sup>10</sup>. The updating of those reports would be very welcome, with the proviso of a more explicit analysis of gender relations and some analytical recognition of the existence of unequal gender status in many key areas of children's lives. Recent national research studies by Pacific countries on the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) and child sexual abuse (CSA), provide detailed information on gender relations and the serious problems of rights to protection faced by many Pacific children. These reports expose issues of sexuality and expression, sexual abuse and gender violence not previously discussed or documented in Pacific societies<sup>11</sup> and provide the most compelling evidence for urgently considering changes in areas of focus in the children's rights framework and current Pacific work, particularly with youth and girls. These CSA reports particularly, have implications of great urgency, for children's rights, women's rights and other developmental work in the region.

The rationale, focus and activities of the Pacific Children's Programme (PCP) gauged by interview and the PCP regional overview and country documents<sup>12</sup>, also included several country reports done by the University of the South Pacific (USP) which provided national qualitative surveys and overview regional analysis for the then proposed Pacific Children's Programme. The PCP Programme documents show the detailed preparation for a regional programme response and the strategy adopted to work with Pacific communities on children's rights,<sup>13</sup> but also the many issues of culture, gender relations,

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<sup>8</sup> See **References**, for list of the Pacific country CRC reports and national responses to the UN Survey on Violence against Children.

<sup>9</sup> **The State of Pacific Youth 2005**, UNICEF Pacific, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea, UNFPA (Office for the Pacific), funded by NZAID.

<sup>10</sup> For example, on Tonga (1996), Tokelau (1996), Tuvalu (1996), Cook Islands (1998), Cook Islands (2004).

<sup>11</sup> **Report on the Pacific Consultation on Addressing Violence against Children, 24-28th. September, 2005**; CSEC and CSA reports on Fiji, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Vanuatu. See **References** for full citations.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Ross Hardy, Project Officer, Pacific Children's Programme (PCP); Project documents – see **References** for full citations.

<sup>13</sup> Pacific Children's Programme planning documents.

gender inequality and gender differentials in children's growth and development not addressed in the regional programme work, while these issues were raised so clearly in the USP qualitative and overview reports. These issues are also relevant for inclusion in programmes by other UN agencies, Pacific governments and non-government organizations, where strategies to advance children's rights and particularly to address the root causes of children's rights' abuses, are needed. It will be argued below that the women's rights framework has much to offer to complement, or essentially empower, children, particularly the girl child, if certain principles from this framework are drawn into the children's rights framework. Recognising and including a gender relations perspective in all children's rights work, it will be suggested later, could add important, empowering dimensions to the children's rights framework and open avenues for greater effectiveness in changing the lives of girls and also boys.

The pioneering domestic violence surveys and research done by non-government women's organizations in Fiji and Samoa<sup>14</sup>, were the first to throw light on violence and sexual abuse of women and children prevalent in Pacific communities and families. These organizations' experiences in working on violence against women and their advocacy that violence against children had to be addressed, were instrumental in the formation of the PCP<sup>15</sup>. Feminist non-government organizations, through their reports, work and advocacy, have really been the main actors for raising children's rights issues in connection with gender relations and gender violence.

On gender and women's rights issues, Pacific governments' reports to the CEDAW Committee, Beijing implementation reports<sup>16</sup> and national policies and plans of action for women of several countries, show the areas of focus chosen by governments to promote gender equality. Women's and non-government organizations' reports, newsletters and statements, indicate the wide range of women's rights, gender and development concerns encountered in Pacific countries. The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre and the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence against Women reports on their work in the field in many Pacific countries, confirm the extent of the abuse of women's and children's rights in the Pacific. There are numerous incidents reported on women's rights and children's rights abuses in different countries; also presented is the range of women's rights work for empowerment and protection of women, including continued advocacy for changes in attitudes, culture, legal responses and laws. The Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), the main regional human rights training and resource service for governments in the region, knows the extent of progress in Pacific countries' adoption (or lack of adoption) of key human rights, women's rights and children's rights instruments. It is active in advocating changing Pacific legislation that discriminates against women, new legislation to advance human rights and the adoption of legal provisions to further protect the rights of women and children. The RRRT is well aware

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<sup>14</sup> The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre's survey on domestic violence in Fiji and its networking on the issue in the region, exposed the prevalence of violence against children and child sexual abuse (PCP interview and documents). Mapasaga o aiga (Family Haven) in Apia, provided a breakthrough in documenting violence against children, in its 1996 domestic violence survey.

<sup>15</sup> As for Footnote 11 above.

<sup>16</sup> The Fourth World Conference for Women held in Beijing, China, in 1995. Governments committed to implement the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), which has twelve critical areas of concern. The BPFA was reviewed in 2000 and 2005 (often referred to as Beijing +5 and Beijing +10 respectively.)

of Pacific cultural arguments and attitudinal constraints slowing down the adoption or implementation of the main human rights instruments in the Pacific<sup>17</sup>.

For this discussion of Pacific culture and gender relations and their impact on children's growth and development, it was considered most effective to let the extensive UNICEF, Pacific governmental, non-governmental and development agency reports, surveys and research "do the talking" and illustrate the lives and conditions of women and children in many Pacific countries - as recorded by these stakeholders' own research and documentation. In some reports, the direct voices of women and girls and children, were presented verbatim and these voices give a clear and sometimes painful view of their life and options. For example, the life anecdotes of teenage girls and boys in as disparate a collection of countries as Tonga, Papua New Guinea and Kiribati, surely gives pause to any Pacific arguments that "those conditions don't affect us". It seemed preferable to refer to these records of the lives of women and children in Pacific national settings and cultures today, rather than make any specific or general characterizations of Pacific cultures and gender relations from ethnographical or anthropological studies, although these can be useful<sup>18</sup>. Pacific women's analysis of gender relations and culture comes across in numerous reports and documentation and in women's newsletters and this is the "voice" also given prominence in the discussion.

Comparisons between the women's rights framework and children's rights framework often occurred during the research, which was, for the author, also a discovery of children's status and children's rights work in many Pacific countries. For reasons of brevity initially, and later, to fully show critical issues in the situation of children in Pacific countries from a gender and children's rights perspective in detail - an analysis of gender relations and Pacific women's status was not presented throughout. The assessment at the end of the paper, of the situation of children from a children's and women's rights perspective and on ways forward in children's rights work, draws on the women's rights framework to make suggestions for addressing gender and gender relations in children's rights work.

The extent of gender inequality and women's unequal status in the Pacific is only briefly outlined although the evidence from numerous sources shows gender inequality is the guaranteed fate for girl children. Country reports showing the serious risks, weak position of rights and problems faced by the girl child, particularly teenage girls, added urgency to the conclusions on the need to incorporate gender relations in children's rights work in the Pacific. The extra attention given to girl children, in certain stages of life, particularly puberty, arose from the evidence in regional and country reports, showing their extremely vulnerable position in Pacific societies and cultures because of gender relations.

Some public debates in the media (mainly Fiji newspapers) at the time of writing were used as snapshot reflections of Pacific public opinion on some issues of children's rights and culture. Otherwise, the use of media reports was not made although any reading of the newspapers in the Pacific or elsewhere, provides ample information to confirm just

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<sup>17</sup> I am grateful also for discussion with Imrana. P. Jalal, RRRT on Pacific cultural issues and the human rights conventions. See also Jalal (1998); **The Big Seven: Human Rights Conventions and Judicial Declarations**, RRRT, 2005; **Pacific Human Rights Law Digest**, Vol.1 PHRLD, RRRT. 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Morton (1996), for a insightful study of child development and parenting in Tonga.

how serious the abuse of children in Pacific countries is and how frequently assertions of Pacific cultural and religious views are used in debates to deny the legitimacy of arguments for women's and children's human rights<sup>19</sup>.

The paper does not review or present a list of countries' national legislation or legal measures to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) or the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It does not assess implementation of these conventions as a guide to implementation by Pacific states of children's or women's rights in the Pacific. This information is frequently provided in most national reports on the CRC and responses to the UN Questionnaire on Violence against Children. Legislation related to CEDAW implementation is similarly available in Pacific CEDAW reports.

## **Definitions**

### **The child**

The definition of a child used in the Convention of the Rights of the Child:

*"a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."* (Article 1)

In many Pacific cultures, a girl child at first menstruation is perceived as a woman and an adult. This poses risks for the girl child if in practice the definition of a child in the CRC (under 18 years) is not applicable in the cultures of some Pacific countries. Case studies done for the Pacific Children's Programme found that "in some countries, the definition of a child is often based on cultural or social factors, such as physical maturity, responsibility around the home or activities to support other family members."<sup>20</sup> In some Pacific countries, in every day practice, age or the legal definitions of a child were often not used in defining children. In an overview report on child protection practices in Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa, Plange (2002) makes the significant remark that:

*"Chronological age was not a marker of any significance in defining children in the..traditional cultures of these countries".*

These and other contradictions in Pacific cultural practices and beliefs, need to be considered in Pacific children's rights work and will be discussed below.

### **Culture**

Cultures change over time and are not static. Some cultural practices and beliefs remain unchanged and are seen as essential to maintaining national, ethnic or group identity. Culture can be defined as male-dominated, or patriarchal, where the attitudes, beliefs, interests, and roles of men dominate social institutions, decision-making, ideas and practices in the private and public sphere.

Pacific countries are rich in cultural diversity even within countries. No single culture exists in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, for example, which have hundreds of

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<sup>19</sup> The debates( in the media or elsewhere) on rights, culture and religion are not particular to the Pacific, although correspondents and opinion-makers in the press may sometimes think so. See "Caught between right and right", by Leslie Cannold, Sydney Morning Herald, October 9th., 2006 on multiculturalism, religion and rights in Australia .

<sup>20</sup> Plange (2002).



distinct language and ethnic groups. In some Pacific countries, cultural unity may appear to exist in island states with a fairly uniform national or ethnic cultural identity.

Interestingly, most of the discussions, research, reports and public debate cited here which refer to culture, rarely contain even a sentence defining what culture is or what is meant by culture<sup>21</sup>. “Culture” or a cultural issue when raised in popular public discourse in the Pacific, often will cover commonly held perceptions of social behavior, cultural characteristics, values and beliefs - usually in relation to ethnic identity, land, relationship of persons or groups to authority and community. Comments on culture at the community and individual level, particularly in regard to social behavior and obligations, are more frequent than reference to institutions and relationships at other levels and their role in determining national culture or identity. Concerns about retaining Pacific identity and culture are voiced in a range of circumstances – from loss of resources and land, to claims about political representation, opposition to certain social changes, or to assert control over the behavior of others, particularly women and children.

In analysing culture and gender relations in Pacific cultures and their impact on children’s growth and development, it will be important to distinguish what culture is, whose culture it is (men’s and women’s), and which representatives of a nation, ethnic group, or social entity are defining cultural practices for the group or nation as a whole. What cultural values are brought forward, for whom, and why? Needless to say, in a patriarchal society, women’s values, beliefs, practices and interests rarely have equal influence or sway.

## **2. CHILDREN IN PACIFIC FAMILIES**

### **Attitudes to children**

#### **Loved, gifts from god**

In Kiribati, children are regarded as “the pearl in the family” and a symbol of the parents’ love. The Kiribati CRC report notes, however, that decaying social structures and traditions are affecting this view of children.<sup>22</sup> Traditionally, men and women have closely defined roles, the husband is the head of household and women are generally expected “to listen and implement” rather than make decisions on village or community affairs.<sup>23</sup> Describing itself today as “semi-traditional and semi-subsistence”, the report notes that the cash economy is changing relations between parents and children, men and women.

In Samoa, children are considered gifts from god; other members of the family, not just parents, are responsible for children’s upbringing, which is of “the mind, body and spirit”, not just physical care. Children are relied upon to carry forth Samoan culture and traditions.<sup>24</sup> The influence of the family (*aiga*) extends to a wide range of relations with whom children can be brought up in Samoa and even overseas; informal adoptions of children, including by overseas relatives, are common. Samoa notes in its CRC report that the status of children is closely connected to the status of women. The Ministry of

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<sup>21</sup> The University of the South Pacific report by Plange (2002) defined culture and socialisation.

<sup>22</sup> Kiribati. Initial Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. 1998.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Samoa Report on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, p.47.

Women recognizes the importance of this connection and has a process for facilitating discussion of reproductive health and sexual health matters between mothers and daughters through its Mothers and Daughters programme. The Samoa report acknowledges that social attitudes make communication on reproductive and sexual health matters difficult.<sup>25</sup>

### **Freedom of expression**

In Palau, in the northern Pacific, traditional attitudes to children prevent the child having any rights to expression with adults. In Palau society, the list of the expectations of a child in the CRC report shows the position of a child in relation to adults: a child must be obedient to his/her elders, submit to authority of all elders in the community, “each of whom has the prerogative to guide and discipline the child”(nglalek buai/beluu), be considerate to others, “be respectful towards parents, elders, custom and tradition and all living things”; know the appropriate time, place and manner of speaking; be sensitive to non-verbal communications by elders and learn by observing others.<sup>26</sup>

Children in Palau do have the right to participate and voice opinions, through different community-based youth organizations, in schools and through other cultural activities. The CRC report is frank in explaining that the philosophical basis of Palaun culture, in terms of welfare, focuses on community or group interests rather than on the interests of the child. On children’s welfare, it explains that in Palau society, the best interests of the child are served by “*what are the best interests of all*”(emphasis added). Palaun culture therefore has a value preference for “the best interests of all concerned”, rather than “the best interests of the child”.<sup>27</sup> A similar view was expressed regarding Vanuatu culture and heritage: “individuals are not singled out” and society is not competitive.<sup>28</sup> The group’s interests are the cultural reference point, rather than that of the individual. This has implications for children’s rights and presents a contradiction between cultural views of rights based on group identities whereas many human rights principles are premised on the primacy and rights of the individual.

### **Physical Punishment**

An underlying characteristic of the family in Pacific cultures is the use of physical punishment in disciplining children. The use of physical and other punishments appears a central tenet in Pacific socialization of children. Studies in three countries (Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa) showed that the community at large can discipline the child.<sup>29</sup>

The commonly accepted Pacific practice of disciplining children with physical force clashes with notions of protecting the child in the CRC yet Pacific parents and community leaders will often vehemently defend the right to use physical punishment as “part of our culture”. In Samoa, it is part of *faasamoa* (*respect and care for family*) to punish children so the child learns the proper ways of behavior, and does not become an “oddy”<sup>30</sup>. In Vanuatu, whipping or shameful reprimands, are part of teaching the child. In Fiji, children are the responsibility of the *vanua* (the wider social group) and different

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Palau. Report on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.18.

<sup>28</sup> Report 2005, p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Plange (2002) – for the discussion of discipline from country reports on child protection practices in Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa, see Overview Report, p. 18-21.

<sup>30</sup> Plange (2002), p.19, quoting from the Samoa Country Report.

forms of punishment are used, often in front of others, to shame the child. The belief is that if children are not punished, they will “end up in trouble later in life”<sup>31</sup>.

### **Conformity**

Unwritten and unremarked upon in Pacific analyses of culture and children, is the value placed on conformity in Pacific communities. Conformity is not made explicit in studies on child development, but is a significant part of parental, family and community expectations in Pacific Island cultures and shapes the growth and development of children. In small communities, a wayward child or parent, girl or boy, is exposed to ridicule and criticism. In communities where tolerance of difference is low or non-existent the choices made by children, youth or adults who feel ridiculed, shamed or afraid of such treatment can be severe: suicide. The high incidence of suicide in some Pacific Island countries sometimes makes headlines and appears in Pacific reports. Analysis of root causes that may exist in Pacific culture and society, in child rearing and development practices, is rarely offered. Suicide is still treated as shameful, something to be hidden, a sign of weakness or at best a mental health issue, rather than inviting serious discussion of the causes and ways in which the community and family can respond to protect the child or adult.

The use of violence to bring up children correctly and the high value placed on conformity to social norms, combined with the oppressiveness of gender stereotypes, can place enormous constraints on children, boys and girls and men and women in small communities. The low value or tolerance of individuality in Pacific cultures and the alien-ness of concepts of individual well being, growth and development, pose some fundamental questions about the paths that need to be taken in promoting children’s rights and how to create conditions that will provide a strong indigenous foundation for human rights work in the Pacific.

These issues of social conformity, individual voicelessness, the use of violence on children and women, intolerance of individuality or difference – are seldom raised in discussions of Pacific cultures and human rights.

### **Status**

Overall, there is general agreement that children have low status and power in Pacific societies, a status similar to that of women. They are voiceless and unable to assert their rights.<sup>32</sup> Children are generally expected to be obedient to parents, relatives, elders and community leaders, to not shame their family or parents and to respect culture and traditions.

### **Concepts of the family**

Common to all Pacific cultures is the concept of the extended family as the norm, where the family is expected to consist of more than just the parents, children and immediate relations (for example, grandparents). In Fiji, the family can consist of aunts, uncles,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, Overview Report.

<sup>32</sup> **The Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and Violence against the Girl Child. Situation paper for the Pacific Islands region**, (Prepared by Penelope Schoeffel et.al.), UNICEF, 2006

cousins and grandparents. The extended family is expected to play a positive role in raising young children and providing social and family stability<sup>33</sup>.

The extended family are always viewed as a positive benefit for all members of it and for children. The family in Kiribati is warmly described:

*"The majority of Kiribati children are lovingly cared for by their families. It is rare to see a small child unattended, without the company of a parent, relative or another child. The village environment provides children with a network of caregivers and playmates"*<sup>34</sup>.

The ethnography of childhood by Helen Morton (1996) provides a detailed account of culture and family relations and the development of children in Tonga.<sup>35</sup> Being a child, learning to be Tongan, the persons around the child, the way parents (mainly the mother) disciplines babies and toddlers, the relationship of parents and other adults with children, the role of other family members, siblings, and neighbours in monitoring and reinforcing culturally appropriate behavior in children, are all described in the context of Tongan families and households in a village or urban community. The depth of the inculcation of learning the culture and identity of being a Tongan child, is based on living in a community as well as living in family. The two are often intertwined. How children are disciplined, responses to children's emotions and crying, methods of instilling obedience, and the appropriate behavior for a girl and boy child, are all culturally determined. This case study shows how parents, mothers and fathers, family relatives, friends, neighbours, peers, others in the community, are persons involved in the development of the child according to Tongan custom and traditions.

Is the family and custom always beneficial for children and is it possible to have critical views of the family, while supporting Pacific custom and traditions? In a study of children and the family in Vanuatu, some analysis is made of the strengths and weaknesses of operation of the extended family under *kastom* (Bislama for "custom": the total of customary practices, beliefs and values)<sup>36</sup>. On the one hand, the family consisting of a wide range of persons with whom the child may live and the supportive elements of community and co-operation under *kastom*, can be recognized as strengths. A ni-Vanuatu saying is that "it takes a whole village to raise a child". However, socio-economic changes affecting Vanuatu today, mean the positive features of the extended family can also be lost. In changing conditions, particularly urban settings, the family can be changed in its configuration and practices. The "family" may be where parents are absent, the household consists of relatives and other adults, the child has no particular adult reference point and lack of money makes children (particularly if staying with relatives) feel a burden. Many children living with non-biological parents are forced into finding ways to support themselves or their families in some of these circumstances.

Hughes (2002), from a Vanuatu survey of knowledge, attitudes and beliefs regarding violence against children, found that families in many parts of Vanuatu are in turmoil and

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<sup>33</sup> Fiji, citing statement by the then President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, at the National Summit of the Family in December 2004. Fiji CRC Implementation Report 1995, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Kiribati Initial Report to the CRC.

<sup>35</sup> Morton, Helen, **Becoming Tongan: An ethnology of childhood**, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1996.

<sup>36</sup> Hughes, Dr. Desma, **Qualitative Study on Child Protection Practices: Vanuatu Report**. Department of Education and Psychology, University of the South Pacific, 2002.

facing great difficulties. *Kastom* practices are taking place but in the context of urbanization, migration of men or both parents for work, changes in village life and difficulties of employment and income. These factors are having an impact on communities, families and children. Marriage breakup or change of partners by one or both parents is not uncommon, putting children in the middle of new relationships also; it was found in this study and others, that stepfathers or non-biological members of new families can expose the child to sexual abuse or violence or neglect.

In Pacific cultures, the extended family is common and its function, traditionally, is as a source of social support, cultural affirmation and identity. The extended family is expected to provide a secure, supportive environment for children and for adults. For children, there are many caregivers and parenting can be done by other relations and adults. Children are surrounded by other children to play with and relate to, other than their siblings. The values of sharing and caring for others in this network of family, is positively instilled as part of culture.

In reality, from many country reports, Pacific extended families and households are in difficulty. Some country reports commented that in a culture where parents are not expected to have sole responsibility for rearing their children, housing and feeding them, these responsibilities may be casually passed on to others and children can be at risk. Many children, when not cared for by biological parents, feel they are a burden and seek means of supporting the family or themselves, through sex work. This sort of motivation for children to sell sex or find a means of earning cash, is reported in several Pacific studies where girls and boys may engage in sex work to pay for schools fees or simply to cover transportation<sup>37</sup>.

### **Diversity and concepts of the family**

Discussions on children and the family often presume on a heterosexual model of the family. In the Pacific region, there are families made up of same sex partners, with children, and/or same sex partners wishing to have children and raise them in families, without harassment or discrimination. Same sex relationships and families are not discussed or their existence given recognition in Pacific discourses on children, families and gender relations, was a point made in discussions in the seminar by UNICEF<sup>38</sup>. Participants pointed out that the variety of family models and parenting that exists in Pacific, needs to be recognized, not just a single model of the family and parenting based on heterosexual relations.

More attention needs to be given also to single parent households and women-headed households and their circumstances and how these impact on children's growth and development. It is known that there is a world-wide trend towards more female-headed households where children, adults and the old are dependent on a single female income earner. There are various forms of the family in the Pacific region and the varieties of family experience for parenting and children's development need to be included in children's rights work and programmes.

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<sup>37</sup> See country examples given below.

<sup>38</sup> Participants at UNICEF Seminar on Child Rights and Culture in the Pacific, held at University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, 30th. October, 2006.

### **Changing economic conditions**

Pacific families and communities, men and women, are being impacted on by changing economic conditions throughout the region and in their countries. Several countries have experienced armed conflict which has disrupted economic life, social and community relations, and severely impacted on the life experiences, growth and development of children, not just during the conflict, but after it (for example, Papua New Guinea and the ten year blockade of Bougainville; ethnic conflict and violence in Solomon Islands and Fiji). Urbanisation and poverty are impacting on Pacific families in all countries. Yet, the harmonious model of the family is still purveyed in most of the literature on children<sup>39</sup>. Issues of poverty and class, ethnic, gender and other inequalities are not factored into analysis of families and children's growth and development<sup>40</sup>. Fiji noted the importance of the family in the culture and society of all ethnic communities, but that changing social conditions put some families in great difficulties.<sup>41</sup> Where families are expected to be a social safety net, many parents do not have the economic resources to support their own children as well as the additional children of relatives, extended family members and other kin who may arrive or become part of the household at any time. Urbanisation, poverty, unemployment, lack of cash income to meet family needs, are affecting families' abilities to cope in many Pacific countries.

Expectations of women are changing and the rising number of female-headed or female-supported households is not recognized in social planning or in family assistance programmes. Children's lives are affected by these changes in the structure of Pacific families and changing urban and rural lifestyles, where cash income is needed for schooling, basic food items, clothing, community obligations and church contributions - to list only essential costs. Money is an important part of urban survival; many parents simply do not have the money to meet children's needs.

Pacific families' daily living costs, particularly in urban settings, are very different from the "idealised" Pacific family living in a rural setting, subsisting on natural resources and cushioned by community support and sharing. This idealized image of the family in Pacific cultures is far from the realities of Pacific family and community living today, but permeates many children's, rural development, environment and development projects and programmes by a range of actors - UN agencies, government ministries, development agencies and non-government organizations.

## **3. GENDER RELATIONS IN PACIFIC CULTURES AND THEIR IMPACTS ON CHILDREN**

### **Gender and Gender relations**

Gender refers to the roles, behavior, characteristics associated with being masculine and feminine in a given society. In the Pacific as elsewhere, gender roles and the cultural expectations of boys and girls, are taught at an early age. Gender begins at

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<sup>39</sup> The Papua New Guinea report on CSA and CSEC (2005) is exceptional, for showing the extent of the connection between economic conditions and impacts on gender relations, men, women and children's behavior and family and community structures in provinces across the country.

<sup>40</sup> Using the concept of the household would be useful, for drawing these issues into analysis of the status of women and children

<sup>41</sup> **The Rights of the Child. National Report on Two years Implementation on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**, Co-ordinating Committee on Children, Suva, Fiji, 1995.

birth, with the differential treatment of parents and caregivers to boy and girl children. Children generally are expected to show obedience to adults. A part of learning their culture is learning gender roles and behavior.

Gender inequality exists in most societies. Only the details vary within countries on the areas and degrees of inequality between men and women.

Gender relations refers to the unequal power in relations between men and women in all institutions and all levels of society.

### **Gender roles**

In Pacific cultures, children are taught their gender roles and socialized into the correct behavior for boys and girls.<sup>42</sup> As children grow older, they are expected to do household chores, which are closely tied to gender. Girls are more restricted in their movements, even at an early age.<sup>43</sup> Modesty for girls and correct ways of behaving towards sisters for boys, are strictly prescribed in culture.

In Tonga, the relationship of brothers to sisters is respectful and protective; the culture spells out rules of behavior of brothers in the presence of sisters. As sisters, women receive respect from brothers, but as wives they are expected to show obedience to husbands. In some countries, women had land rights under customary law and therefore higher status than now, where land rights of women have been lost or undermined by introduced laws (for example in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu). Women's rights advocates in the Pacific have long ago raised issues of the distortion of gender relations and increased inequality for women under colonial rule, whereas in traditional societies men's and women's roles were complementary and given equal status<sup>44</sup>.

Pacific women have high status in some societies and settings. In Polynesian societies, women of rank can have more power than commoner men and women. Other forms of hierarchy in Pacific societies impact on gender roles and gender relations. Ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, all intersect with gender, affecting the identity, status and rights of men and women in a given society.

Some examples of gender relations in Pacific cultures: in Vanuatu, there is a gender division of responsibility between men and women and this also represents a division between men and women's status and privilege under *kastom*. Men are considered superior, women are there to support their husbands, maintain the household, look after children and tend to the family garden and animals.<sup>45</sup> In Kiribati, women cannot speak in the *maneaba*, the traditional meeting house where decisions are made by the elders(men) on community affairs. Men have superior status and power, which is exercised over women in families, in communities and in traditional institutions.

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<sup>42</sup> See Plange,(2002) on socialization processes in Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa; Morton (1996) for Tonga.

<sup>43</sup> Morton( 1996) for example, describes the male toddler being allowed to wander out to join adults, while the female child is not.

<sup>44</sup> Griffen (1975).

<sup>45</sup> Vanuatu, in 2005 UNICEF report.

Boys and girls, through socialization, learn their gender roles and also the fundamental basis of gender relations – the unequal power men and women. A teenage boy in Vanuatu put it succinctly:

*“...girls will get married and go away but boys will stay and inherit land therefore they’re more important than the girls”.*<sup>46</sup>

### **Control of female sexuality**

Many of the controls exerted on the girl child - ideas of modesty instilled at an early age, correct behavior, lack of freedom of movement away from the home - are based on ensuring the virginity of girls until they marry.<sup>47</sup> Loss of virginity brings shame on the family. In Kiribati and other Pacific countries, including Tonga, Samoa and Vanuatu, the value placed on virginity rules the lives of young girls. Loss of virginity and pregnancy before marriage can change a girl’s life, her education and job prospects and her personal development. From numerous Pacific case studies, the family and community are firstly more concerned with the family’s honour. The girl herself, is hugely shamed for not showing respect for her family if she falls pregnant as a teenager, before marriage. In cases of rape or sexual abuse resulting in loss of virginity, the family is still more focused on its position in the community, rather than the girl’s health or wellbeing or mental state.

Boys are allowed greater freedom of movement, not only due to differing gender roles and responsibilities for household chores (for example, going to food gardens with fathers), but the different attitude to male sexuality. Boys are expected roam about with their peers, to be sexually active with many partners before marriage.<sup>48</sup> The tolerance of male sexual behavior contrasts with that of girls, who are expected to remain at home and be virgins at marriage. In Kiribati, traditionally, there is a ceremony to publically display evidence of a girl’s virginity on her wedding night, bringing praise to the parents and family if the outcome is positive.<sup>49</sup>

The country studies show that family and community attitudes to girls who have lost their virginity are commonly indifferent to the impact on the girl child, even if rape or sexual abuse is the cause of the pregnancy<sup>50</sup>.

### **Sexuality and sexual behavior – different standards for boys and girls**

In Vanuatu, boys are free to go out, roam about and err – having many sexual encounters with the opposite sex is regarded as part of manhood and masculinity. Boys sexual behavior is laughed off, while girls “get drastic treatment” if they misbehave.<sup>51</sup> The freedom of expression allowed male sexuality produces a lack of any cultural notions of a distinction between consensual sex and sexual use of girls and women. The tolerance of expression of male sexuality, without any restraints or cultural opprobrium

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<sup>46</sup> Hughes (2002), p. 50.

<sup>47</sup> In Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, to name a few countries.

<sup>48</sup> Hughes (2002)

<sup>49</sup> ABC Radio Pacific programme, “The red cloth ceremony”,

<sup>50</sup> See the moving accounts of teenage girls and pregnancy in **Teenage Pregnancy in Tonga**, Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and United Nations Population Fund( UNFPA) January 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Hughes (2002), p53.



for coercive, violent and risky behavior by males, seems central in Pacific attitudes to sexuality and is having serious consequences for girls and women. Male sexuality begins with boys' gendered understanding that girls and women should be available to them at any time. This attitude to male sexuality - of boys and men - is having direct impacts on the health status of children and women in many Pacific communities. It is a cause of the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and more seriously, HIV/AIDS.

### **Gender relations in marriage – power of men over women**

Children remain under the authority of their parents until marriage, then women come under the authority of husbands. The relatives in a household can also exert authority over the wife, including women in-laws as well as men. Men in general, however, including brothers, uncles and grandparents, have authority over women and girls. Some young people are unable to assert their rights to school or education, if an arrangement for marriage is made. In Vanuatu, girls can be committed to a marriage by their parents and the boy's family, without any knowledge or discussion with the girl. The authority of parents is paramount and children must abide by their wishes and any decisions made by them about their marriage. When bride price<sup>52</sup> is involved, the families may come to agreement on the marriage even when the child is quite young.

By puberty or in their mid-teens, girls in particular, therefore, do not have control over their bodies or decisions affecting their lives in Pacific cultures where early marriage and bride price is practiced, but in changed circumstances: in a monetarised economy, where the value of the girl child in traditional culture has been commodified by parents arranging the marriage of girls for the cash exchange.

A youth worker in Tanna, Vanuatu, describes girls' feelings about these practices today: *"Plenty of us young people, because of our customs, our parents are forcing us to get married. We don't have a choice...they choose who we are going to marry. But some of us want to go to school, want to work – we want to be able to choose what we do."*<sup>53</sup>

## **4. ASSESSMENT OF GENDER RELATIONS, IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS WORK**

### **Gender relations and impacts on children**

The impact of gender relations on children's growth and development differs at different stages of their lives. In some cultures, even before birth, the girl child is aborted in favour of boys. The Pacific Islands countries do not have pronounced rejection or disfavouring of girls at birth but in some countries, there are gender differences in

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<sup>52</sup> There are many interpretations of bride price and its role in traditional cultures. Indigenous scholars have often had to reinterpret foreign scholars' interpretations of bride price as money exchange for women, arguing that bride price is misnamed and is a more complex representation of commitment between the two parties (families); it also represented, it is argued, the significant economic contribution of women's productive work.

<sup>53</sup> Hughes (2002) p. 52.

feeding girl children (in Papua New Guinea, for example), or women and children eat last (in Fiji, for example)<sup>54</sup>.

Gender relations can affect children's growth and development in several ways. Gender roles of women giving them heavier work loads, poor nutrition, and lack of control over reproduction, results in poor health for women, which translates into poor health for children.<sup>55</sup> The connections between women's health, education and literacy and better health for children, are well known. Gender inequality affects women's access to resources, and limits their options for maintaining households although women are primarily responsible for children's welfare, food, nutrition and health. These aspects of women's lives are generally, nevertheless, left out of children's health and children's rights work in the region.

### **Influences on gender relations: economic development and armed conflicts**

Economic relations – at all levels – and income, wealth and resource disparities at national and community level, impact on households and on gender relations. Changes in traditional gender roles have occurred in urban and rural settings as a result of changing economic conditions. Within households, many women are using their skills to earn income, many men have few employment opportunities and no skills to draw on to support their families. Changes in gender roles and responsibilities occur as families and households respond to changing economic conditions. Poverty and political instability in the Pacific region is impacting on families' and men and women's roles and responsibilities.

These changes are also impacting on children, who may take up economic roles to support their families or themselves. The Pacific CSEC studies give examples numerous examples of children, boys and girls, and youth, finding ways to earn cash to support themselves or their families. In Kiribati, young girls engaged in prostitution often go out to foreign fishing vessels with family support and their income is used by their families; in Solomon Islands, young boys and girls sell sex for money to support themselves or their families, or simply to purchase desired consumer goods; similarly, in Papua New Guinea, young girls earn income through selling sex, either working along busy central highways or in the towns. There are too few (if any) studies of economic conditions and their impact on families and children.

Conflict situations in which men are engaged in armed conflicts and women, children and the elderly are left to sustain themselves, put women and children in particularly vulnerable positions for years (for example in Bougainville and Solomon Islands). Women are solely responsible for household maintenance, care of the elderly and children, and for the provision of basic needs including food. Women and children are particularly exposed to gender violence during and after armed conflicts. In Fiji and Solomon Islands, ethnicised political conflict and violence have left a legacy of changed gender, ethnic and political relations and economic regression which has impacted on women and children for decades.

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<sup>54</sup>Work and personal experience, Nutrition Section, Department of Health, Papua New Guinea (1980's) and in Fiji, respectively.

<sup>55</sup> Numerous studies show that women's health affects children's health (**Maternal Nutrition**, UNICEF 1983).

Recent national studies on violence against children, child sexual abuse and the commercial sexual exploitation of children<sup>56</sup>, show that Pacific families and communities are experiencing great changes in social relations. Many of these changes are brought about by changing economic circumstances and the general need for men and women to find ways to support their families. Few Pacific countries have economic policies directed at meeting the needs of the majority of their populations. New economic opportunities can change gender relations (for example, mining and deep sea fisheries which may take men away from their families for extended periods of time) or a lack of economic options, the situation faced by the majority of men and women in Pacific urban and rural communities, can also necessitate changes in roles (women and men seeking employment or focusing on cash-directed activities). Migration and increasing urbanization are responses impacting on families, gender relations and the conditions in which children grow up.

Gender stereotypes about men supporting their households can create strains when women are prime income earners. Many women supporting their households and providing for children nevertheless are expected to be subordinate to men in the family. Domestic violence and violence against children, arise from the universal condition of patriarchy - unequal gender relations - but also are exacerbated by economic conditions and pressures on families.

Globalisation and unequitable national development policies, are affecting Pacific families and have changed the traditional roles and relationships of men and women, and also children.

Having said that, gender relations in Pacific cultures, in any time, do have a profound impact on children's growth and development. The issues identified below as the most critical now affecting children's lives and development, are closely related to unequal and oppressive gender relations and the subordinate status of women. Before examining the critical issues affecting children and showing the gender dimensions of those issues, the assessment looks at current areas of children's rights work. The critical issues outlined have not yet become part of children's rights work, although raised in children's rights surveys and research. The need to address them and suggestions for ways forward, appear in the conclusion.

### **Current areas of focus in children's rights work**

Government and development agency programmes for children prioritise health and education in work for children's rights. Data and surveys of education and health of children can always be found in Pacific reports on women and children<sup>57</sup>. The Pacific Regional Millennium Development Goals Report 2004 covering 15 Pacific Island

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<sup>56</sup> See collaborative regional consultation organized by UNICEF Pacific, Save the Children Fund, Fiji, Ministry of Women, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation, Fiji, and Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, **Report on the Pacific Consultation on Addressing Violence against Children, 24-28th September, 2005.**

<sup>57</sup> For example, UNICEF's Pacific situational analysis reports on women and children cover health and education; UNFPA population study reports also provide information on maternal and child health; Pacific country reports on CRC implementation tend to focus on legislation and institutional arrangements for child protection and welfare; Health and Education Ministries in all countries regularly report on children's health and education.

countries has information on child mortality, maternal health and education (MDG 4, 2, and 5 respectively), as well as on other areas that have implications for children (all the MDGs). Generally, the physical health of children and their education, are the prime focus of most countrywide work on/for children.

Education is well addressed in children's rights work. There is considerable focus on education – especially formal education and the rights of children to basic education. This is the one area where gender analysis and data is evident. Pacific reports read positively on the levels of school attendance of boys and girls.<sup>58</sup> Generally, there is parity between boys and girls attending primary and secondary schools<sup>59</sup>. Gender disparities occur in access to education at tertiary level. However, education statistics do not necessarily show the decisions made within families and households on equal access to education for boys and girls and whether many girl children do not go to school, or are pulled out of school sooner than boys, for economic or household reasons<sup>60</sup>.

Health and education work for children does not seem to have any awareness of gender differentials and how gender may impact on differences in children's status, rights and needs. Assessments of children's health and education should have awareness of the many ways in which gender bias and gender discrimination – in Pacific families, culture, values – can affect children differently based on gender and draw this analysis into programmes in both these sectors.

### **Current work - identified age of risk – the 1-5 age group**

Based on the materials of Pacific research, workshops, consultations and programmes on children in the region, there is a strong focus on the child's physical growth and development – especially in the 0-5 year age group<sup>61</sup>. In health delivery in particular, it is standard international practice in health delivery to focus on children in this age group. The maternal and child health framework of health care delivery has institutionalized the 1-5 age group as a basic focus. Regional and national programmes and services follow this pattern and it is acknowledged here that support for children's healthy, safe growth and development in these first years of life is vital. Gender relations and gender discrimination are rarely brought into this vital area of children's rights and MCH work however, and universally there are gaps existing that do not address gender factors in child health<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> **Pacific Islands Regional Millennium Development Goals Report 2004**, p. 37-39. Some countries however, for example, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, show much lower net enrolment ratios in primary education than others.

<sup>59</sup> PIRMDG Report 2004, p. 50 cites equality or near equality in most Pacific Island countries (PICs); Pacific country reports on CRC implementation.

<sup>60</sup> For example, when a girl child has to take care of other children, or do the duties of a wife if she dies or is ill.

<sup>61</sup> For example, the Integrated Early Child Health and Development Programme, UNICEF Pacific Multi-country programme 2003-2007.

<sup>62</sup> Not just in the Pacific, of course, but generally. Apart from critical issues identified in India by the women's health movement long ago (for example abortion of girl children; undernutrition of girl children based on gender and cultural practices), health systems regard children and babies in an "ungendered". Its beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this here. Children's rights work could, however, fill this gap by being aware of gender impacts on children's growth and development, and incorporating this awareness into outreach work and child protection programmes.

The 1-5 age group has also been refined, based on research identifying an even more critical period – the 1-3 age group. A regional workshop also urged new understanding of the crucial period of 1-3 years.<sup>63</sup> Country reports from Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Vanuatu, on early childhood development (ECD) presented summaries of countries' issues, needs, and barriers to early childhood development in this even more focused age period, 1-3 years. A presentations on early childhood development pointed out the significance of this period for children's brain development, which affects their progress throughout life.<sup>64</sup> The reasons given for advocating a renewed awareness of early childhood development in the 0-3 age group, were its significance in these areas of the development of a child:

physical development,  
mental development,  
social development,  
economic development,  
social mobilization and

the integration of all these mutually reinforcing reasons.<sup>65</sup> It could also be argued that gender affects children's development in all these areas, and what is more, throughout childhood and adulthood. Gender however, is rarely taken as a critical factor in childhood development, in health and education work.

Below, a more general case is made for seeing the impact of gender relations (the power relations between men and women) on children's mental, physical and psychological health, growth and development, focusing on the most critical issues that emerged from the Pacific data and surveys, many of which were done for or within children's rights programming. It could be easily argued, however, that gender (recognition of gender influences) could be incorporated into work on children's health from an early age – with untold beneficial effects for children, particularly the girl child.

One of the suggestions in the conclusion of this paper on gender relations and their impact on children, using the efficacy of identifying an age period in the health care delivery system, is to suggest that another age period of great risk to children, particularly the girl child – puberty – be identified as a period that is critically in need of attention in children's rights work in the Pacific.

## **5. CRITICAL ISSUES AFFECTING CHILDREN'S GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

From the review of the situation of children in the region, these appear the most critical issues for discussion on gender relations in Pacific cultures and their impacts on children, particularly on girl children:

1. Violence against children (VAC)
2. Child sexual abuse (CSA) and the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)

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<sup>63</sup> **Pacific Regional Conference on Early Childhood Development**, A Joint UNICEF and the University of the South Pacific Workshop, 15-17 June, 2004, Suva, Fiji. UNICEF.

<sup>64</sup> . Ibid, Workshop Report, 2004, p. (v).

<sup>65</sup> Dr. Cliff Meyers, Regional Adviser on Education, EAPRO, presentation, "The Global Perspective", at **Pacific Regional Conference on Early Childhood Development**, Workshop, June 2004, UNICEF. P8-9.

3. Puberty – an age period of risk for the girl child
4. Sexuality and male dominance
5. Teenage pregnancies and the rights of girls
6. Early marriage and bride price

### **1.Violence against Children:**

The Regional Workshop on Violence Against Children Report<sup>66</sup> concluded that violence against children is common and culturally acceptable in many Pacific countries. The Fiji Situation Analysis report of 1996 stated that: “Anecdotal evidence suggests child abuse is increasingly common” (p.54). Since then, evidence has mounted that children in Pacific countries experience many forms of violence. The recent research report by Save the Children Fiji, on the physical and emotional punishment of children in Fiji<sup>67</sup>, shows the extent, many forms of and acceptance of violence against children in the community.

The first reports on violence against children in the Pacific were by women’s rights groups surveying domestic violence. The Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre in Fiji and Mapusaga o Aiga in Samoa produced studies that showed domestic and sexual violence also involved violence against children. The Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre study in 2001 found that most male and female respondents were hit by their parents or a parent<sup>68</sup>. It also found that the majority of cases of violence against children occurs in the home and by family members or persons known to the child. In Papua New Guinea, a research report, “The Family and Sexual Violence in the National Capital District of PNG”, showed 99.9% of cases of violence occurred at home.<sup>69</sup> It found that a high proportion of offenders have high school, college and technical education, discounting notions that domestic violence is based on low economic status and low education levels.

Other institutions, after years of pressure and advocacy by women’s rights groups, also now keep records of violence against women and children. Police statistics in Fiji show child physical abuse by age and type (bodily harm, common assault, wounding and abduction) for 1996-2000.<sup>70</sup> In Fiji, recent public debates in the media on corporal punishment and disciplining of children, show the extent to which violence against children is considered a right of parents and an essential part of culture.<sup>71</sup>

The violence against children can take many forms: in Vanuatu, fractures causing hospitalisation, burns with a stick of firewood, harming children with hot water or cigarettes – were reported.<sup>72</sup> In the one day seminar on “Children’s rights and Culture in the Pacific” organized by UNICEF (30 October 2006), a woman police officer participating recounted the extent of the violence against children that occurs is often so bad that even as an officer she found difficult to learn to handle: also the violence can occur in police compounds and not be reported. A worst case she heard of was a mother

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> **The Physical and Emotional Punishment of Children in Fiji: A Research Report**, Save the Children Fiji, 2006.

<sup>68</sup> FWCC (2001), p 21.

<sup>69</sup> **Pacific Women’s Against Gender Violence**, Vol. 10, Issue 3/4, February 2006, p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> In Plange (2002), p. 30.

<sup>71</sup> See **Fiji Times**, September 8, p. 7; September 9, 2006, p.4, p.29.

<sup>72</sup> Plange (2002), from Vanuatu Country Study, cited p. 27.

inserting a stick into the vagina of her daughter as a threat and to control her daughter's behaviour and the case not being reported by the police<sup>73</sup>. Many issues arise from this anecdote alone: that perpetrators of violence against children can be men or women, the pervasiveness of the abuse and the limited reporting, even in "communities" where such acts should be seen as offences.

Gender relations and the low status and disrespect for women in Samoa, are the reasons for continued domestic violence in the Samoan community, according to Mapusaga o Aiga, the women's organization most well known for its response to gender violence and domestic violence in the community. It argues that only by changing the gender relationship and behavior that show a fundamental disrespect for women, will women and children to stop being victims of domestic violence.

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) findings also dispel other myths about family violence. It is not only husbands' abuse of wives, but violence by males generally in the family, that affects women and children: "Male respondents hit their sisters, daughters and mothers as well as their wives and lovers".<sup>74</sup> The term "domestic violence" has significantly been understood as partner violence, of men against women, which is still the most predominant category. However, there is violence by other actors, against women and children. The highest category of non-partner violence was of sisters; the FWCC survey found that nearly a quarter of non-partner violence was of brothers against sisters. Gender relations and men's position in the family generally, not just in the relationship of marriage and the "ownership" of the wife – are responsible for violence in the family<sup>75</sup>, which is where children's growth and development takes place.

### **Reasons for violence**

A high incidence of violence in families reportedly due to a woman's refusal to have sex with her partner, including during pregnancy. Many cases of violence occurred during pregnancy, even though in Fijian and Indo-Fijian culture it is considered unsafe for women to have sex in that period. The physical abuse of many women "usually began during the first pregnancy *and continued throughout their marriage*"<sup>76</sup>. (Emphasis as in original). Women physically abused while pregnant were 26.2% of all women surveyed (726 women); and refusal to have sex represented 41.6 % of women hit by their partners<sup>77</sup>.

Gender roles and relations in the family, including the assumption that women's bodies are the property of men and women have no rights of refusal to have sex, were the most common reasons behind domestic violence - not economic reasons. Equally disturbing is the fact that both men and women respondents agreed that it was all right for a man to hit his wife for "disobedience". A woman's "disobedience" in the family was also given as reasons for non-partner family members to hit women.

Children in violent households are part of that violence. Violence against women obviously impacts on children's growth and development, including their emotional and

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<sup>73</sup> Personal communications with the author at the seminar.

<sup>74</sup> Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Report 2001, p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> Whatever form or members it consists of.

<sup>76</sup> FWCC 2001, p. 26

<sup>77</sup> FWCC 2001, p. 26

mental health. One woman constantly abused by her husband, even when pregnant said:

*“My daughter developed a symptom that when[ever]she sees her father drink she starts to have a running stomach and begins to sweat all over her body”*<sup>78</sup>. The high proportion of women hit while pregnant also has impacts on children – the effects unknown at present. It is a false division to see violence against women and violence against children separately.

The Fourth Regional Meeting on Violence against Women in the Pacific, held in 2005, expressed concern that governments are not giving priority or resources to policy and legislation to address violence against women and children. It also was critical of the lack of gender sensitivity towards victims/survivors of gender violence, the lack of services available for women and children in isolated rural communities, and cultural issues such as the use of traditional reconciliation or relationships to ‘solve’ gender violence cases.

Responses to violence against children in children’s rights work in the Pacific include regional initiatives. The Pacific Regional Workshop on Violence Against Children, organized by a number of stakeholders working on children’s rights, made recommendations on the role of the law, the police and legislation to respond to violence against children. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC) are raising awareness through a film, “First call for Pacific Children”, which looks at violence against women and children in Pacific communities. The Pacific Children’s Programme (PCP) emphasises positive parenting and child development, to get messages across on VAC. Its strategy of working with communities, however, appears gender blind and does not recognize the existence of gender hierarchies in communities.

Strategies to address violence against children will not have an impact on the problem, if gender relations and the unequal power relations between men and women are not made part of the discussion of violence against children in the family and in communities. The violence evident in Pacific families, households and communities is related to gender relations – specifically male power over women which extends to power over children. In this sense, the gendered nature of violence against children has to be addressed.

Violence against children is perpetrated by men and women however. There is a common acceptance that part of disciplining children is the use of violence and this is part of Pacific cultures. Debates in the Fiji media on corporal punishment at the time of research, bear this out. Church leaders, some teachers organizations and parents, will often express concern that children must be disciplined to be obedient and to, in fact, grow up as properly behaved persons according to their culture.

At national level, Save the Children Fiji has done research on violence against children<sup>79</sup> and has made programme provisions for addressing violence against children through popular education on alternatives to violence. It is conducting a review on corporal punishment and alternatives, to change attitudes in communities to the use of violence against children.

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<sup>78</sup> **Breaking the Silence**, “Kamla’s story”, Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, n.d.’

<sup>79</sup> Already cited above.



## 2. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children(CSEC)

National studies of child sexual abuse in several countries<sup>80</sup>, challenge any idyllic notions of Pacific island societies and families as havens of safety for children. The existence of child sexual abuse (CSA) and the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) are found in all the country studies. The Pacific Regional Workshop on Combating Poverty and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth held in Fiji in 2003<sup>81</sup>, initiated the studies following an East Asia and Pacific meeting on CSA and CSEC. The Pacific studies are substantive, based on surveys and field studies. The details are disturbing and require work on children's rights to be drastically reconsidered.

Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa did KABP (Knowledge, Attitudes, Behavior and Practices) surveys. The Fiji study showed that children surveyed knew of child sexual abuse in their society, affecting themselves or others; 22% of a Suva survey and 29% of school leavers, had knowledge of CSA. Rape of young girls and incest (by fathers, uncles, grandfathers) was reported. Some 13-14 yr olds were pregnant as a result of incest. Despite Fiji's ratification of the CRC, abuses of children exist, ranging from violence and neglect, to CSA and CSEC. The report covers types of CSA and contains statistics on rape, incest, domestic sexual and physical abuse, molestations, sodomy and other sexual abuse<sup>82</sup>.

The majority of victims are girls but boys are also subject to abuse; the study found that boys in state care facilities were particularly vulnerable. Some of the boys are quoted as requesting to be moved from the facilities because of abuse; younger boys are vulnerable to abuse by older boys. All the studies show that the majority of cases of child sexual abuse occurs in the family – at home. The Fiji study reports that “of the 35 cases of child sexual abuse reported to the Police Sexual Offences Unit in 2000, 33 were committed by a trusted family member”; the Fiji Women's Rights Movement statistics in a 2001 report showed that 92.7% of child sexual abuse cases were perpetrated by an adult known to the child.<sup>83</sup>

*“The patterns that emerge are that perpetrators are those individuals given some responsibilities for caring for the child, and/or known to the child. For example, parents, extended family members, siblings, teachers, neighbours and caregivers.” (Fiji Country Report)*

In the Solomon Islands, child sexual abuse is known; the report notes it is considered a culturally sensitive issue. Infringements on children's rights are sometimes ignored by communities – or resolved by compensation payments, using traditional appeasement methods to right the wrong to a family, not the child. The Solomon Islands law only recognizes the rape of girls, not boys. Incest happening in remote rural communities is often not reported; some mothers may also not protect their daughters from abuse.

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<sup>80</sup> UNICEF CSA and CSEC studies for Papua New Guinea (2005), Fiji (2006), Solomon Islands(2004), Kiribati( 2004) and Vanuatu( 2004).

<sup>81</sup> Initiated as a follow-up to the East Asia and Pacific Regional Consultation on CSEC held in 2001; the Pacific requested its own regional consultation.

<sup>82</sup> Plange(2002)p .26-27

<sup>83</sup> Fiji CSA and CSEC Report, p. 30

There is cultural acceptance of some reasons for child sexual abuse - *if a wife is dead or is not interested in sex* (emphasis added) abuse of others - including children – is justified. As with domestic violence, where one of the main reasons given was when a wife refused to have sex with her husband or could not, child sexual abuse is considered “understandable” in the culture if a woman does not fulfill her marital role or a man does not have a wife to do so.<sup>84</sup> Incest with daughters is justified and the mother may not protect her daughters.<sup>85</sup>

The rights of men to use violence for sex, including in marriage, is based on the notion of male sexuality being uncontrollable and men’s superior position giving a husband the right to have sex with a wife at any time; if a wife is not available, gender relations in the culture allows the husband to substitute a child or daughter.

In the period of armed conflict, the abuse of women and girls was more pronounced:

*“Virtually any girl or woman in areas affected by the tensions was vulnerable to sexual coercion by militants”.*<sup>86</sup>

In Vanuatu, it was reported that CSA and incest is common and involves girls more than boys; CSA can continue for extended periods and many young girls become pregnant due to abuse by close relatives and others in positions of authority in the family, the church or community.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children or children’s involvement in prostitution to earn money to support themselves or their families, was reported in all countries. In Solomon Islands, child sex tourism in urban areas and prostitution by young girls, are related to poverty, rural-urban drift, unemployment and scarcity of wage income, factors presenting difficulties for meeting family needs. Some boys and girls sell sex to pay for school fees, or girls reportedly offer sex for a ride to school.

The most common form of CSEC is prostitution of young girls under the age of 18.<sup>87</sup> In Kiribati, young girls engage in prostitution by going out to visiting Korean fishing vessels. Sometimes they are taken there by a relative and the family accepts their activities and income. Child prostitutes, again mainly girls, are engaged in sex or use sex to earn income to pay for costs of living in urban centers.

The Papua New Guinea CSEC and CSA report discusses the contentious issue of cultural practices involving adults with children in the past, in analyzing CSA in present day PNG.<sup>88</sup> Adult relationships with children, men’s relationships with men, exist in Papua New Guinea’s diverse cultures. Papua New Guineans dispute some of the interpretations by foreign anthropologists and scholars of these cultural practices and

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<sup>84</sup> Solomon Island CSA and CSEC Report, p.28.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> In 2000, Solomon Islands was disrupted by an armed political and ethnic struggle in the capital and surrounds of Guadalcanal. The conflict lasted several years, impacting on social, political and economic life.

<sup>87</sup> Solomon Island CSEC and CSA report, p. 17.

<sup>88</sup> Papua New Guinea CSEC and CSA report, p 26-28 discusses various practices recorded in anthropological studies from the 1920’s to works in the 1990’s on different practices.

initiation ceremonies.<sup>89</sup> Cultural practices of betrothal even before puberty, different cultural accounts of initiation of boys, including the symbolic use of semen passing from an adult male to a male child as part of rituals around male growth, or the permitted seduction of boys by older women within Papua New Guinea's cultures, show a diversity of sexual relationships existed between adults and children. The Papua New Guinea report raises these issues of the diversity of sexual relationships in its cultures – past and present.

The CSEC and CSA reports should be regarded as deep challenges to Pacific Islands' views of their cultures and their societies' attitudes and practices in relation to children. These accounts of contemporary Pacific society and the fact all country reports found that child sexual abuse was common - poses a question that must be answered by Pacific governments and countries committed to protecting children's rights.

A key characteristic noted in study after study is that:

*Fiji: "A significant amount of perpetrators of CSEC and CSA are male" and are "either family members or family friends". (p. 5).*

*Papua New Guinea: "CSA and CSEC occur on a regular basis across all strata of Port Moresby society. Cases reported are believed to be the tip of the iceberg." (p. 72).*

*"Children are commonly victimised by stepfathers or when there are problems in their mother's de facto relationship."*

*"There is an increasing amount of CSA where children 5-10 years [are] abused by older children". This includes older boys raping younger boys.*

And to quote again on CSEC:

*"The commercial sexual exploitation of children is a common phenomenon in PNG. CSEC is not hidden or disguised but it is a sensitive social issue that the majority of people will not openly acknowledge or confront. Silence allows CSEC to flourish in urban centers and fester in remote, rural communities". ( p.76)*

And on CSA:

*"If the perpetrator is a friend or relative, sympathy is too often focused on the offender....people often 'feel sorry' for the perpetrator rather than the victim". (p 76)<sup>90</sup>*

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<sup>89</sup> PNG CSA and CSEC report, p. 27

<sup>90</sup> See p. 77 for an extended list of the consequences of CSA on children and the close link leading to CSEC. When a child victim of CSA has nowhere to go, where silence prevails on the abuse, the child may escape to other households, where new abuse may begin. Examples of repeated rapes or CSA of children, including boys - make for difficult reading in this report. There is no escape for the abused child. Parents or family accepting traditional gifts or food to compensate for the abuse, compromise the child and confirm acceptance of the abuse. Boys who are paid for sex after being repeatedly raped, move on to selling sex; boy victims of abuse being perceived as "gay" by the community and then changing their dress and behavior to fit. The profound effect of CSA and CSEC on the growth and development of children – particularly the girl child – cannot be underestimated.

*“CSA, like gender violence in general, appears to be increasing and is increasingly tolerated as more people are exposed to violent and sexually explicit media”. p 78.*

### **Culture and sexual abuse**

Children’s and women’s rights advocates affirm that Pacific cultures are not abusive nor does culture condone sexual abuse and violence. Dame Carol Kidu, addressing Papua New Guinea Parliament on the gang rape of schoolgirls, declared that there was no word in the Motu language for rape and that traditionally, women and girls were protected by various customs. She noted it was a sad sign of the social breakdown of society, if men did not speak out against these crimes.<sup>91</sup> Of significance is her reaffirmation that culture and customs can and did protect women and girls and that these protections were no longer being applied *by the society and community* – which is then, a breakdown of culture. Her other appeal is to men in the community, in Parliament and in decision making positions, to protect women and children, which would uphold their culture and society.

### **How are children reacting to CSA?**

An adopted girl in Samoa, whose parents were unknown, had been raped by her adoptive father since she was 7 or 8 years of age; she attempted to overdose on panadol twice. When she went to New Zealand on a scholarship, the stepfather followed her there to continue the abuse. She finally went to the police and is now on her own. It took a different society, legislation and political will to uphold the protection of children, to make this possible. Another girl was abused by her *aiga* (family) when she was about 8. She could not tell her mother. She tried to protect her sisters. Another girl was raped by her stepfather who threatened to kill her with a shotgun if she went to the police. Her brother tried to protect her but was beaten. The stepfather’s brother who was a priest said “marriage is forever” and that the girl “just had to accept it” (the abuse). In both the cases reported, the mothers knew about the abuse of the girl children, but would do nothing.<sup>92</sup>

The Cook Islands was shocked by a child sexual abuse trial when it revealed the inadequacies of child protection knowledge or practice in the culture and within families. Two girls who were repeatedly assaulted told their mothers who did not report the crime. One mother beat her child on hearing. Only a teacher at the school exposed the abuse and protected the child. The man charged, a foreigner who frequently visited Cook Islands, had befriended several families and raped their daughters. In the court case, the shock was that parents and families and the communities involved, did nothing to protect the children or act on the children’s reports. The children were in fact beaten, for raising the abuse incidents. Awareness raising campaigns on the need for children to be believed when told about CSA, followed.<sup>93</sup>

### **3. Puberty – a period of risk for the girl child**

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<sup>91</sup> **Pacific Women Against Violence Newsletter**, Vol 10, Issue 3/4, February 2006.

<sup>92</sup> Afioa Maiava Kota Peteru, Mapusaga o Aiga, presentation, “Domestic and Sexual Violence against Women and Children in Western Samoa,” Pacific Regional Meeting on Violence Against Women in the Pacific, n.d.

<sup>93</sup> “Child sex trial shock in Cook Is”, **Pacific Women Against Violence** newsletter, Pacific Women’s Network against Violence against Women, Vol. 6. Issue 4, June/July 2001, p. 5

A significant turning point in the lives of girl children is at puberty. In Melanesian countries, first menstruation marks the period where gender relations, custom, culture and beliefs come into effect in having a major impact on the life and development of the girl child.<sup>94</sup> Girls become eligible for marriage and are also presumed to be available for male sexual expression –with or without the girl’s consent. In other countries, the cultural value placed on virginity descends on girls at puberty and the constraints on girls are intensified to preserve their virginity, which becomes a badge of family honour. The opposite, loss of virginity before marriage, is taken as a shame on the parents and family, and an act of ‘disrespect’ by the girl child or teenager, regardless of the circumstances of in which it happened, even if it is by rape or sexual abuse.

Virginity for girls is placed highly in the culture. However, in all the countries, girls are still kept in ignorance of sexual and reproductive information. The powerlessness of the girl child to negotiate her life at this point, based on gender relations and expectations, continues to impact on this age group, with repercussions for Pacific girls’ education, health and life choices. The cases of teenage pregnancies are acknowledged as increasing and as a problem in many countries (for example, Cook Islands). In Tonga, the poignancy of the stories of loss of virginity for girls, as a result of rape by adult married men or innocent sexual relations with boy acquaintances, shows the extent of the psychological, social, educational, health and economic impacts on the girl of sexual relations with or without full knowledge and consent. The consequences for the girl in all the cases of pregnancy, are very different from that of boys<sup>95</sup>.

#### **Why can puberty be an age of risk?**

The definition of the child in the Convention on the Rights of the Child is any person under 18 years of age. In many Pacific cultures, a girl child becomes a woman after first menstruation. In several countries, girls are not treated as children but as women and can be betrothed and committed to marriage by their families, even at ages as young as 7-8 years. In Vanuatu, adults view girls from 12-17 years as adults<sup>96</sup> able to make decisions; after menstruation they are perceived as a women in the culture, rather than as immature children. “This puts the female group at risk of being used and abused,” according to a Vanuatu study prepared for the Pacific Children’s Programme.<sup>97</sup> The numerous personal case stories in the review materials, bears this out.

The legal age of sexual consent in countries’ legislation (16 years for girls in Vanuatu, for example) may not be applied where custom views of sexual maturity are based on physical looks and growth, not age; for girls, menstruation then is a marker of sexual maturity by culture and girl children are placed in positions of women even if they are not socially or psychologically mature.

Numerous examples illustrating the experiences of young girls in the Papua New Guinea are described in the CSA and CSEC study (2005) which covered East and West Sepik, the Highlands Highway from Mt. Hagen to Lae (the second largest city) and Port Moresby, the national capital.

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<sup>94</sup> Hughes (2002) p. 33 ; Plange(2002);

<sup>95</sup> See **Teenage Pregnancy in Tonga**, 2004.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. Hughes (2002)

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.33.

“Child Protection in Vanuatu” (2003) also shows the lives of girl children/teenagers in village and urban settings. Its conclusion is unequivocal: abuse is “endemic in Vanuatu”. Many examples show young girls are lost, at risk, and have nowhere to go for support or guidance. Young girls with no support from parents or the community, feel a burden to their families if they remain unmarried, this showing that girls, even if in school and interested in furthering their education and work, feel obliged to perform their gender roles of getting married. One young girl reported “men expect her to have sex with them and she cannot do anything about it.” Many young girls become pregnant and are later abandoned by older men.<sup>98</sup> Young girls who are married, and unhappy with their treatment, are forced to stay married because to leave means a return of the bride price.

In Polynesian societies, the pressure on girls has different cultural circumstances, but with equally profound impacts on their lives and development at puberty. Virginity before marriage is highly valued and at first menstruation, girls are recognized as sexually mature and marriage is presumed to be their next stage in life. Their young lives are then marked by their parents and family, by the need to maintain their virginity until marriage. This period is one of great risk for girls where virginity is strongly promoted in the culture. The teenage girl who loses her virginity (in whatever circumstances) is condemned and the pregnancy can mark a dramatic abrupt end of her life as a child – the social condemnation of the girl is about the shame for the family and disrespect for parents.

Girls at puberty, whether living in traditional rural communities or in towns, because of gender relations and cultural attitudes, are vulnerable to arranged marriages by parents for bride price, sexual abuse, pregnancy, violence, commercial sexual exploitation. Children’s rights agencies and women’s rights advocates may not, in their work, recognize the girl child in ways that would give attention to their particular **gender needs** and provide protection at this critical time in **girls’** growth and development. Child protection work is generally ungendered and women’s rights work does not focus on children, which may result in neglect of the particular needs of the girl child at this age and period of transition<sup>99</sup>. Questions need to be asked on whether the definition of the child in the CRC will be ignored by Pacific countries where culture and traditions have different views of the definition of a girl child and a woman.

The impact of gender relations in Pacific cultures in the period when a girl child becomes a woman - at puberty – needs a critical exploration, from both a children’s rights and women’s rights framework. Puberty places girls under tremendous pressures. From reading the numerous case studies and literature, including compelling personal accounts in some of the literature on how girls at puberty negotiate or have no power over their bodies, lives, growth and development, it is urgent that puberty as a period marking unwitting transition of a girl child into adulthood, receive considerate attention and support in children’s rights work and women’s rights advocacy.

The main reasons for risk for girl children in this period are:

- lack of control over decisions affecting their lives

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<sup>98</sup> Hughes (2003), p. v.

<sup>99</sup> Shamima Ali, co-ordinator of the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, made this point when reporting on the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Violence against Children, Florence, Italy, 2006, at the national women’s leaders consultation organized by the Ministry for Women, Social Welfare and Housing, Suva, October 2006.

- lack of consent –no value placed in culture or practice – on consent in sexual relations
- changes in practices regarding marriage and bride price, so girls are being exchanged for cash, without traditional checks and protection
- period where girls particularly vulnerable to culturally unconstrained male sexuality and sexual behavior
- girl children in age are perceived as adult women available for sexual relations – with or without consent in some cultures.

#### **4. Sexuality and male dominance**

Girls are noted to have less knowledge of reproductive health and sexual relations than boys in UNFPA studies on sexual knowledge and attitudes of adolescents in Kiribati, Cook Islands and Samoa.<sup>100</sup> A Tonga study on teenage pregnancy showed girls do not have knowledge to help them negotiate their way through sexual relations because they are expected to not be sexually active until marriage. Gender relations influences society's attitudes to boys' and girls' sexual behavior and the information they each have on sexuality and reproduction. More important, gender relations determine girls' attitudes to themselves and their bodies and boys' attitudes to themselves and their bodies. Boys learn through their socialization, the cultural attitudes to boys and men's sexual behaviour. A key element of which is men's gender socialization on their rights to have access to and control over women's bodies<sup>101</sup>.

Gender relations in many cultures in the Pacific support male sexual dominance and deny the independence of female sexuality, except as part of servicing male sexuality and for reproduction. The extensive practice of male sexuality with violence, without social or cultural disapproval or constraint, is impacting on the lives of children and women. Children's (particularly girls') safety in their families and homes, are at constant risk in many rural and urban communities in Pacific countries. The cultural practice of encouraging sexual activity without responsibility amongst boys, and promoting controls on female sexuality and virginity for girls, to uphold group or family honour, are contradictions in Pacific cultures. The values preached in Christianity are ignored when double standards are applied to women's sexuality (to be controlled and repressed) while exonerating men's sexuality, even when it is responsible for the abuse of children, boys and girls, and women. The example cited earlier of a male preacher exonerating his relative's abuse of his stepdaughter (a child) because of the man's rights within the sanctity of Christian marriage, says it all in terms of affirming the rights of male sexuality and dominance above all other principles, rights or laws.

The main victims of oppressive, exploitative and harmful sexual behavior by men, are girl children and women. The impact on children of CSA is the subject of global discovery – from country to country and culture to culture. The numerous Pacific CSA and CSEC reports show that sexual abuse is predominantly of males against females of all ages, and against boy children. The dominance can also be by boys over other children.

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<sup>100</sup> See **References** for full citations. USP and UNFPA, 2002, Numbers 1-6.

<sup>101</sup> Normally, one would write only “women's and children's bodies”, but the evidence even in this regional overview, shows many instances of boys (older) rape or forced sex with younger boys; older men with boys, in consensual or forced sex or sex for money.

From the preceding discussions on gender relations in Pacific culture and their impact on children's development and growth, based on the review of materials covering existing children's rights research, documentation and work, it is evident that a major problem for girls and women is male sexuality. Notions of consent in sexual relations, equality between partners, are being undermined or are not even firmly established in Pacific cultures and society. Other powerful influences, including foreign and local media, films, videos and images and content on the internet, are bringing in new views of sexuality and sexual relations which can have negative impacts on women and children. The CSA studies show Pacific children are not excluded from being the victims of new influences promoting exploitative and violent sexual practices.

The PNG Institute of Medical Research's studies on sexuality and sexual behavior, analysed changes in PNG based on influences including western notions of beauty and pornography. The research, done to provide insight into current risks in behavior related to the spread of HIV/AIDs, showed disturbing new information on male sexual identity and behavior and "the extent and severity of gender-based sexual violence committed against women and girls (citing Jenkins 1995).<sup>102</sup> On changing sexuality and sexual behavior, the report noted that explicit child pornography, both imported and made in Papua New Guinea, shown in various public locations including kiosks and shops in cities, towns and villages, often preceded gang rapes.

From a brief observation and reading materials from Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH) and other programmes in the Pacific, not many discuss sexuality and sexual relations in terms of gender relations. Issues of sexuality and reproductive health information are discussed only in the framework of preventing the spread of disease, particularly HIV/AIDS. Sexuality education tends not to differentiate between boys and girls or even mention the crucial issue of gender hierarchies and the different power relationships that exist between men and women, boys and girls, in sexual relations.

Male sexuality and behavior needs to be critically and honestly examined by many different stakeholders working for children's and women's rights, but also more broadly, by civil society, development, and other organizations, including youth and men's clubs, to gain a realistic and rights-based approach to sexuality and to promote a non-violent, consensual sexual culture in the Pacific, based on human rights of all, men and women, boys and girls.

At present, Pacific boys and girls can rarely openly discuss sexuality or find out more in an open manner; most information, some studies showed, is gained from peers. Cultural taboos about discussing sexual matters with parents or adults, prevents information that would empower girls and enable a different understanding of sexual and reproductive rights amongst boys and girls. Boys also can benefit from information which would change gender stereotypes, including of male sexuality. Understanding gender relations and gender equality could introduce new ideas of consensual, non-exploitative sexual behavior and sexual enjoyment without infringing on the rights of others. Parents and schools in Fiji are being urged to stop being blinkered over sex education and inform young people of sexuality and reproductive health.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>103</sup> "Time to face the facts of life" by Verenaisi Raicola, **Fiji Times**, 30/9/06, reporting on the call by the Vice President of Fiji, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, for parents and schools to begin talking about sex education with children.



## 5. Teenage pregnancy and life choices for girls

The accounts of the teenage pregnancy in Tonga<sup>104</sup> show the devastating impact on the lives and development choices of young girls, should they lose their virginity before marriage. The personal case stories show the powerlessness of young girls, the lack of any concept of control over their bodies when faced with demands from men or boys, and the impact of pregnancy on the lives of young girls. Most have to end their education and raise the child with help of family members. Parents' reactions to teenage pregnancy focus on loss of virginity and shame on the family, not the girl's welfare, mental or physical. The accounts in girl children who become pregnant, do not show exemplary understanding or support from Pacific families or parents.

Girls who lose their virginity suffer tremendous psychological and mental anguish, social disapproval and even violence. Fear of parents' anger and shame causes teenage girls to hide their pregnancy, attempt abortion or suicide. Girls internalize that they have done something wrong in shaming their parents, Even in cases of rape or sexual abuse, the girl's experience as a victim of abuse is totally ignored. Girls in Tonga reflecting verbatim on their experiences, reported being shouted at, beaten, berated for days and weeks, and even parents moving away because of the shame brought to their family.

Girls may attempt suicide and/or make many attempts to abort the pregnancy. The report, **Teenage Pregnancy in Tonga**, (2004) has interviews with boys and girls which show the devastation of the experience of teenage pregnancy for girls and the guilt-free lightness of the experience for the boys involved. Boys continue schooling; in love matches, parents may refuse to allow the pair to marry, so the girl takes care of the child while the boy moves on. Boys interviewed were frank in their discussions of the girls' fate; other girls agreed a pregnant girl should not be allowed in school because of the impression it would give her peers. In terms of human rights awareness, the accounts of Pacific community, family, parental, health professional's responses to teenage pregnancy showed an unblinking indifference to the health, mental state, education or future of the pregnant teenage girl.

## 6. Early marriage and bride price

In two countries, there is ample evidence from reports written for the Pacific Children's Programme ( Plange, 2002; Hughes 2002 on Vanuatu and CSA and CSEC reports for Papua New Guinea), that in many communities in the various cultures within these countries, arranged marriage and bride price are still practiced. Arranged marriages were previously negotiated based on many considerations. Many young girls in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, have arranged marriages made for them by parents, to gain the bride price. If the marriage fails, the girl cannot return home or break up with her husband, because the bride price has to be returned.

These practices may contradict the rights of the child under the CRC, on his or her rights to have a say in decisions affecting their lives. In some cases, girls have wanted to remain in school but have no choice but to marry as their parents wish.

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<sup>104</sup> **Teenage Pregnancy in Tonga**, SPC and UNFPA, January 2004.

Without going into the many examples given in the reports, it is necessary to raise the issue of child marriages in Pacific cultures, for consideration as a children's rights issue. Do children need protection, can girls have redress to the CRC to resist marriage against their wishes but against their parents' plans. Is the culture and parental control the greater power or the rights of the child, and particularly the girl child?

Is there need for discussion of the issuing of bride price where parents have put a monetary value on their daughters and engage them in marriage for this purpose?

Arranged marriages and bride price are children's rights issues affecting the development and life choices particularly of the girl child. The Pacific countries may not have discussed these issues but they should be discussed and clarified from a cultural and children's rights position, in all countries affected.

## **CONCLUSION:**

### **Culture, gender relations and children's rights**

Cultures can change and are in a process of constant change. The debate on culture, identity and human rights in the Pacific, has not been clarified in a systematic and open manner in a way that is indigenous to the region. Culture and rights needs to be discussed in a context not distorted by political violence, ethnic dominance, or the assertions of cultural rights of one group over another. The discussion of culture also rarely has a gender dimension. In the outline above of conditions in Pacific cultures today, especially as they impact on women and children's rights, growth and development, it is clear that there are Pacific cultures and specificities of culture for many places and peoples but: "Whose culture is it?" Many of the cultures are not women or children-friendly.

The joy, richness, goodness and value of Pacific cultures are tied up now with assertions of who can and cannot speak about culture, who owns what culture, and what aspects of Pacific societies and nations will be lost, if certain quite specific cultural practices or beliefs are changed. Usually, women and their behavior and children's obedience to elders, are considered essential ways of maintaining Pacific culture and identity – for those in positions of power of course.

Women and children should declare that they want more say in the culture they live in. The characteristics of gender relations in Pacific cultures have been distorted and changed over time. Complementary, supportive and equal relationships between men and women working together in gender-specific ways for maintenance of their families, children and communities, – do exist and did exist in Pacific cultures and can be a common vision for the future.

From the overview above on gender relations and the impact on children's growth and development, it is clear that children are not doing well in key institutions such as the family, based on gender relations. Boys as well as girls suffer gender violence. Boys are also socialized into positions of assertion of their rights over women – as their "natural right" and the norm. Superiority of men and inferiority of women are internalized. In many Pacific societies, this was not part of the culture and women had power and respect.

There is nothing to be gained by romanticizing the past – *or romanticizing the present*. The position of women and children in the family and community in Pacific countries is

not pretty: subordination through violence and sexual abuse affect their lives in families. This is not the idyllic Pacific of tourist fiction, but the reality for many Pacific islanders. Lest any doubters say this is *not the majority of women and children - it often is almost half*. Some of the studies of domestic violence, show up to forty per cent of women experience violence and abuse. If the studies are disputed for their small sample or for the researchers being women, there is the Samoan Family Health Study, done by many collaborators government departments, to add veracity to the statement that family violence/domestic violence/gender violence, is an issue. It affects children's growth and development. How could it not? And how can the issue therefore remain outside children's rights work?

Gender inequality is evident in all Pacific countries. Women have unequal positions in all sectors, this is the fate of girl children once they become adults. Will work for Pacific children's rights and growth and development, continue to ignore gender as a prime influence in children's lives and the fact gender relations is an underlying influence in all the main social institutions that children grow up in and are a part of?

Social relations in key institutions in the Pacific need review, from an equality and rights perspective, for understanding the *current* impact of gender relations on children in many Pacific societies. The impact on children is there. The evidence from the literature reviewed appears overwhelming: surveys and analyses even have the voices of children, including young girls, conveying this message: that gender inequality exists and children do feel the impacts on their lives directly. Some of the children's statements are compelling:

*"If a boy forces a girl[to have sex] in a village, it is seen as natural, often."* (Vanuatu).

Or,

A teenage mother, pregnant after a rape:

*" My parents were really upset when they found out and my father was silent for a long time. He didn't talk to me for about two weeks. My mother was really mad with me and she told me I was careless and disrespectful. But then they found out how I got pregnant...."*<sup>105</sup> (Tonga)

The family in Pacific societies has features that have been lauded, appreciated and valued. But the family as an institution is facing great onslaughts of change – exogenous and indigenous to the region, economic, social and political. Globalisation is impacting on Pacific Island economies. Armed conflict, bad governance, corruption and political instability sometimes lasting decades, affect Pacific Island populations in various ways. Women and children, with men, are impacted upon by all these factors and the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, religion and other forms of identity and hierarchy.

In this study of gender relations in Pacific cultures and their impact on children's growth and development, it has been surprising to find how little gender relations as a concept, analytical tool, advocacy focus, development issue, or practical reflector of reality – is incorporated in children's rights work. Gender-neutral frameworks of work, language and perception, in work focused on such gendered institutions as 'the family' or hierarchically-differentiated units such as a "community", for the protection or care of

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<sup>105</sup> **Teenage Pregnancy in Tonga**, SPC and UNFPA, 2004.p 35.

children – seems almost an anathema to anyone working on women’s rights and gender equality.

Gender relations which are about power relations are, from this overview of gender relations in Pacific cultures in different countries, having a common impact on children in key areas of their lives – the family, the community, their childhood and transition to adulthood, their life experiences and choices. Gender relations has a great impact on girls, predictably. It can be concluded with certainty that the main impact on the growth and development for most girls, will be gender inequality. Can this cycle of predictable gender inequality be ignored in children’s rights work?

The position of girls in relation to violence and abuse, is quite horrendous, once attention is given to the issue. UNICEF and other agencies have made breakthroughs in Pacific research and documentation, not just on “traditional’ issues in the situation analyses of women and children, but on new urgent areas of focus, for example child sexual abuse (CSA) and the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). These important studies by UNICEF give a picture of what is happening in the Pacific – to children – and surely, these critical issues must be acted upon? What has been highlighted in the assessment is that gender relations and gender inequality are at the core of these issues.

Many critical areas have been left out of this study: economic power and empowerment of women; land rights and distribution; decision-making and control over resources. Focusing on the key institutions of the family and gender relations, gender roles and expectations of children, sexuality, marriage and violence in the family hopefully shows the situation of children and women in these “harder to reach” areas of children’s rights and women’s rights work.

What are ways forward? Changes need to be made to understand how gender relations impacts on so many areas of children’s lives. At the moment, gender relations are not really incorporated in children’s rights work. This is needed, or children rights will not be advanced significantly.

Below are suggestions for changing the concepts and focus of children’s rights work, drawing on concepts from the women’s rights framework. The children’s rights framework can be more effective in addressing children’s rights to protection, by recognizing the influence of gender relations on children’s rights and development, which has been shown in this brief overview of gender relations in Pacific cultures.

The suggestions following, draw on a general understanding of the direction of the children’s rights work and relevant areas from the women’s rights framework, as personally experienced and understood. These suggestions are presented, with great appreciation of the strengths of focus and intention of the children’s rights framework: to protect children and advance children’s rights.

\* \* \*

### **Conceptual and practical suggestions:**

## 1. Make conceptual and strategic linkages between the Children's Rights and Women's Rights frameworks and work

Ways forward in children's rights work in the Pacific- be aware of, use the analytical tools of and monitor gender inequality in children's rights work.

The children's rights framework is ungendered (as is the concept of the child and children) and is a product of adults acting on behalf of children to develop and define their basic rights. The women's rights framework comes from the struggles of women for their rights. It is constantly evolving, recognizing the different impacts of development, ideology, economic relations, social and cultural institutions, on women. It has recognized class, ethnicity, colour, sexual orientation, as impacting differently on women, affecting their status, rights, options. From a generic view of women as one with similar interests in their collective advancement as women, women's rights work has evolved, has many strands, and has changed strategies and emphases, depending on lessons learned from women's experiences at global, regional, national and local levels. Some of the conceptual insights developed in the women's rights framework can be useful and are indeed vital, for making sense of some of the issues emerging now and for understanding and responding to the position of children in Pacific cultures:

- their position in the family
- their growth and development which includes more than physical health
- education and life options, influenced by gender roles and expectations
- violence and physical/other forms of punishment and the gender dimension
- sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation of some children
- arranged marriage and loss of choice for girls
- teenage pregnancy and shaming of girls, loss of education
- inculcation of gender stereotypes determining behaviour and life options for girls and boys
- gender violence and gender inequality in the futures of children

Changing ideas and attitudes to women has been part of the women's rights framework, as well as pressuring for legislative change and for the protection of women's rights to control themselves and their bodies. The core principle of women's rights advocacy are sometimes lost or diluted in gender mainstreaming strategies or the application of gender analysis. It is not the intention to do that here. Central in women's rights work is the belief that changing how women are perceived and treated in institutions, at all levels, beginning with the family, and in personal and sexual relations, is part of achieving women's rights. Given the position and perception of children in Pacific cultures, and their position in the family, understanding gender relations in Pacific cultures and changing attitudes to the position of children and women in the family and other institutions, could be a transformative part of children's rights work and advance both children's and women's rights.

The children's rights framework has not been led by its constituents for obvious reasons, and reflects international agreements by states' parties on basic children's rights. *Protection* and *provision*, (by adults, the state, responsible agencies) are very strong features of the children's rights framework. However, the children's rights framework, because of its origins and scope in ensuring legislative and physical protection and care, can lag behind in addressing some issues happening to children and the wider dimensions of their lives. The children's rights framework also does not challenge social

institutions or gender relations which can be so damaging to children as has been shown.

The additional protocols to the CRC, show recognition of then emerging critical issues affecting children's lives, for example, child labour and trafficking. There are changes happening in some children's rights work worldwide and holistic approaches to the conditions affecting children's lives. Now, more than ever, there needs to be broadening of the concepts and scope of the children's rights framework which guides work by state and non-state actors responding to children's needs. Children cannot express their needs or direct the focus of children's rights work. The responsibility is for adults to listen to what is happening and note the conditions faced by children.

From a reading of the Pacific materials on children's experiences and lives, there seems a mismatch between current critical conditions affecting the majority of children, and ideological and programmatic preferences for continuing with comfortable strategies in areas of health, education and the 1-5 age group. Recognition of new critical areas needing intervention is possible, based on the excellent groundwork done in Pacific Children's Programme and research on children's rights . From a cursory introduction to many of the key actors and organizations through this UNICEF work, there is a young and vibrant children's rights' capacity within UNICEF and political will to review and reflect on the direction of Pacific children's rights work, including through this UNICEF Pacific seminar on "Children's rights and Culture in the Pacific". New directions can be taken and it is suggested here that gender and gender relations be recognized as powerful influences on children's growth and development. From this study, it is evident that Pacific girl children are in positions of horrific vulnerability in some cultures, on a daily basis, and gender blindness or stereotypes, and religious and cultural beliefs about girls lives, leave girls without knowledge or affirmation of their equality and rights to protect themselves. Silence on issues of gender inequality, gender violence and abuse of children based on "culture" – protects adults, not children.

The children's rights framework and the women's rights framework have features that can contribute to the work for children's rights on the one hand, and remind us of the need to protect children, on the other. Both frameworks have features that can contribute to the work for human rights for children and women.

## **2. The Pacific family – review gender relations in the family as part of work on the family as an institution and place of safety for children**

Child protection work cannot ignore violence in the family. Some issues that should be discussed and recognized are:

- Domestic violence – violence against women means violence against children
- The extended family – can change and is not always a place of safety for children. Who are accepted as new members of the family, risks for children, managing child sexual abuse – can these issues be discussed with parents, teachers, caregivers, community organizations?
- Pacific customs of informal adoption – is there a need for awareness to be raised of potential risks for children? Can Pacific parents and communities be encouraged to review possible risks or suffering for children in some cases? And can parents and communities learn methods of preventing harm to children and be honest and strong enough to reexamine informal adoption if there are problems

- Pacific customs of multi-parenting by many care givers – are there positive and negative experiences?
- Corporal punishment of children, violence and discipline – are these a necessary part of culture, “preparing children for life”? Can children's rights work create understanding of other methods of discipline for use by parents?
- Psychological stress and children – raising awareness of children's development, impact of experiences (e.g. of violence)

### **3. Changing the children's rights framework of protection - to also include concepts of self empowerment for children, girls and boys, but particularly the girl child.**

The children's rights framework has a starting point of protecting children from harm, removing them from harm and legislating punishment of those who harm children. However, the family as an institution, the home as a private space, and the community as a benevolent watchdog and mediator, are firmly held concepts that presume children will be in ideal settings, watched over, cared for and protected by others - the family, the community, or the law.

The conceptual assumption of protection is that parents and adults and the community '*want to protect children*'. From the Pacific study materials, this does not seem to be the case. Children are supposedly protected but are not. Communities and parents, in country after country, do not respond to child sexual abuse, “unless in extreme cases”. Mothers fail to protect daughters, families fail to expose or restrain stepfathers or grandfathers' abuse; church leaders sometimes defend actions of a father with a daughter as “conjugal rights”. There should be no illusion that the community in its many forms in the Pacific, has the mechanisms, will and forbearance to act to protect children or women, particularly regarding sexual abuse.

The concept of protection presumes action by others around the child. Sometimes, these others are the very persons children need protection against. Children have no idea of their rights or who to turn to, when obvious figures of support reject them. Children need some powers – here it is suggested that they need ideological power and knowledge – which gives them some power to protect themselves. Children's rights work should empower children, who should not be kept in positions of powerlessness, expected to be protected when the society and adults clearly are not protecting thousands of children, daily. Knowledge given to children, on risks to their person and what is right or wrong and how they can handle problems, have been successfully used by some countries to empower children to know when their rights and their bodies are being violated.

Girl children particularly need empowering. Teenage girls particularly at puberty are left in ignorance of menstruation, and of course, of intercourse, causes of pregnancy, STIs and HIV/AIDS. Girls in the case studies do not have concepts that their bodies are theirs. These are fundamental issues for children's empowerment *and protection*. Holding back knowledge from girls on sexual and reproductive health, sexual behaviour and risks, sexual behaviour of others, including men, and methods of protection, expose girls to risk. The Pacific research studies<sup>106</sup> on adolescent reproductive health knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, showed that boys in all countries had more information than girls, boys were more sexually active and had more sexual partners

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<sup>106</sup> By UNFPA and the University of the South Pacific – see **References**

than girls, and girls had very little information. The studies on teenage pregnancy are more explicit: girls did not have facts relevant to them, including on menstruation and pregnancy. More significantly, they had no idea how to handle boys and emotional experiences; some simply submitted to sex because they felt if they had followed a boy out of a dance, that was sex was expected of them.

Healthcare providers do not wish to convey this health or reproductive information to adolescents or unmarried persons, even adults; parents do not convey it to girls, and girls pass around limited information amongst themselves. The choices of reproductive health providers to provide information based on strategies for prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDs and STIs amongst teenagers, do not help young boys or girls in making choices and understanding the facts and emotions of their sexual development and behaviour, so that they can make informed choices and protect themselves.

Empowerment should be part of children's rights work, especially in this specific area of understanding the biological, physical, emotional, social and risk aspects of children's sexual development – without pre-arranged life prescriptions thought of by adults. Children in the Pacific, particularly girl children, presently do not have the right to information on sexuality and reproduction, or means to control their fertility and protect themselves outside marriage, as this is considered culturally inappropriate behaviour. Girls are ignorant, however, of their rights to say “no” to men or boys, their rights to bodily integrity and their ability in some circumstances to protect themselves. The passivity and ignorance of the girl child, her fear of parental anger and gender, cultural obedience to elders and males, are as much risks to the child as unwanted sexual intercourse. This is a failure to protect the girl child by putting her ignorance based on social gender norms, is inexcusable – but done by adults in the church, health sector, schools and family, based on their beliefs about gender, female virtue and proper behaviour.

#### **4. Identifying puberty as an age period of risk where girl children need protection**

Extrapolating from the age of risk of children adopted universally in health care delivery systems, it is suggested that a similar mechanism could be used to focus on *an age of risk related to social/physical in the development of children (puberty)*, could help protect girl children and be a significant period for gender and equal rights education for boys and girls. Puberty could be identified as a conceptual and practical point for beginning new children's rights work. This suggestion is to open the framework of children's rights work by identifying another significant period of a child's development – puberty – for discussion of their health, social and gendered development into adults. From the Pacific research of numerous country studies, including on CSA and CSEC, it is a period of high risk for girl children and of risky behaviour, attitudes and dominance of male children.<sup>107</sup>

Puberty is a period of high risk for girls in particular.

Children's rights work could cover the following:

1. Information sharing and quality knowledge for girls and boys

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<sup>107</sup> At the UNICEF seminar, one reservation was expressed that this suggestion of an age/period of risk could open children/adolescents to more restrictions and moralizing restrictive information from some quarters.



Discussion of :

- transition to adulthood - mental, physical, emotional development
- cultural attitudes, gender expectations and behaviour
- puberty for boys and girls – different experiences and cultural expectations
- sexual violence and abuse as a rights issue
- the issue of choice – a fundamental discussion for girls and boys:
  - i) for girls, on rights to their bodies, choice, arranged marriages; gender roles and assumptions of marriage; bride price;
  - ii) for boys, issues of women's rights to their bodies, choice, respect for partners rights, risky behaviour, options
- Menarche and physical sexual maturity – what this means for girls; concentrated information sharing on biological and social relations

2. Health delivery – broader definition of health to include mental and emotional health of boys and girls. Puberty should also be identified as a focus for gender sensitivity in health care delivery for children – boys and girls – at that age; it appears an age of risk for girls - possible life changing experiences (rape, early marriage, unwanted pregnancy); also for boys (violent masculinities, suicide); psychological stresses in Pacific cultures; (boys and girls). This is not synonymous with reproductive health work which contributes to children's growth and development when and if presented as an empowerment exercise, not as health delivery for prevention of disease.

3. Child Protection Work: could be redirected, if it does not already exist, to give attention programmatically to information and knowledge, counseling for boys and girls in this age group – as part of child protection strategies specifically for adolescents.

## **5. Incorporate the concept of the right to bodily integrity into children's rights work**

This particularly applies to girls but studies show that boys – children generally – are at risk of child sexual abuse by adults or other children. Boys also need to learn concepts of their right to bodily integrity.

Introducing the notion of consent and bodily integrity (a core contribution of the women's rights movement) to the children's rights framework is a response to the phenomenon of child sexual abuse – which is directly connected to gender relations as has been shown. CSA was reported as "common" in all the Pacific country studies. This concept must be drawn into child protection strategies.

This suggestion is made with urgency, as the children's rights framework is based on protection, whereas, from the study of numerous country reports and surveys on issues of children's rights and gender relations in Pacific cultures, **it seems clear that parents, adults and the community cannot be relied upon to protect children** until their attitudes change to children's and women's rights. Introducing the concept of the right to bodily integrity into the children's rights work - to be developed with children first – would provide them with knowledge of their rights to bodily integrity and control. It provides empowerment to the child protection framework, while still working on building the concept of protection of children in the community and with parents and adults.

For the girl child, the concept of bodily integrity is extremely urgent, to allow her self assertiveness and respect for her own body and knowledge of her rights, in the face of cultural concepts that promote parents' and male ownership and control.

## **6. Raise issues of sexuality and rights**

Male sexuality, in particular gender stereotypes of heterosexuality and men and women's roles, permeate all the reports on the abuse of children's and women's rights. It would be helpful to begin a discussion on sexuality and rights in the Pacific, beginning with dialogue between children's rights workers and other rights actors, including women's rights organizations. Children's rights workers, adolescent reproductive health personnel, women's rights advocates, sexual minorities and transgender rights groups, can begin the analysis and discussion, on sexuality and rights work in the Pacific. It may not seem connected, but is central to the protection of children.

The exercise of sexuality and male sexual behaviour predominantly, is often at the base of abuses gender violence and abuse of children's rights and women's rights. In analyzing gender relations, many studies and surveys in the Pacific, of country conditions affecting children, show that male sexuality and behaviour, is a particular risk for children. The discussion at the UNICEF seminar pointed out that many forms of sexuality exist, and that efforts should be made to avoid bias in assuming only heterosexuality existed in Pacific cultures. This point is well taken and there is a need for continued discussion and understanding of the issues of sexuality and behaviour as a human rights, issue of relevance in the outcomes of not just children's rights work, but for health, HIV/AIDS, gender, women's and sexual minorities' work.

Issues for discussion:

- Male sexuality, dominance and violent masculinities – need to be acknowledged. What is the impact and how to respond in children's rights work, so that men and boys, and women and children, understand their respective rights?
- Gender socialization – understanding men and women's socialization processes and how unequal, dominating gender relations are perpetuated in notions of sexuality and rights
- introducing concepts of consent and respect for others' sexual rights

## **8. Children's rights framework – and the women's rights framework - learning from holistic empowerment strategies**

Children's rights work focuses on protection. The CRC has a relatively narrower focus on legal protection of children. Children's rights developed internationally by state and adult advocates working on behalf of children. The CRC gives primacy to the family, the community and the state for protection and provision for children.

The framework has certain key assumptions which are significantly challenged by the situation of children outlined in Pacific country research and surveys. Pacific families are changing, fluid, and not always constituted by members who have the best interests of children in mind. Children are protected and treasured in Pacific families; they also face hardships experienced by their family or household circumstances; economic policies and changes in conditions of survival, affect gender relations and children's lives. The

children's rights framework needs to expand to include other factors of the state and economy, globalization, media and other influences on the position of children.

The assessment of families and gender relations in the Pacific indicates children are not necessarily protected or safe in their families or homes. Economic changes and pressures on families and households, impact on children. The CRC and children's rights framework is not holistic in taking into account the overall environment/s of the child.

The following are concepts that can provide a more holistic view of the family and the world/s in which children live:

- Using the concept of the household and gender relations in the household –to look at economic conditions, gender roles and contributions to family and household maintenance, and the role of children in contributing to families and households.

- Understanding the head of the household –and women and children's position – in female headed households; the household is often to be supported by a male head – often is not.

- Inequalities of power in the family – gender relations – also reflected in children's position and work.

- Economic relations at global and national levels, has impacts on households, and different impacts on men and women's work, and on children. The children's rights framework does not address economic conditions, class, poverty and other conditions that affect children's lives, their abilities to enjoy their rights, and their options.

Broadening the framework of children's rights work, helps identify the critical factors affecting children's growth and development – which can be addressed in children's rights work.

## **9. Conceptual issues: Definition of the child**

The definition of the child in the CRC is any person under 18 years, with some provision for country legal differences. In many Pacific countries, the age of the girl child is much lower; she ceases to be a child on menstruation, which can be as early at 10 years or as late as 15 years.

Are cultural concepts of maturity applied to children, accepted in the Pacific by children's rights representatives?

The definition of a child has implications mainly for the girl child: girls may have arranged marriages at menarche and have no control over their lives. Does the CRC protect them? Will Pacific communities challenge their own culture and assumptions about the age of a child and agree on a new age for marriage? Is arranged marriage and bride price, a cultural factor withdrawing girls from schooling without their consent, contrary to the CRC and children's rights?

## **10. Cultural risk: are there customs or traditions that present risks to the rights of children?**

These need to be known, studied and included in children's rights work.

## 11. What is the role of the community in protecting children?

There is an uncritical view of the community in much of the literature in the Pacific, not just on children's rights work. Many of the strategies for children's protection or for conveying children's rights principles, are directed at communities (undifferentiated by location, class, gender, or traditional hierarchies). Communities are viewed generically, uncritically, and somewhat romantically, as the source of all good implementation in the Pacific - on children's rights, rural development, governance, and participation – to name a diverse few! The Pacific Children's Programme has focused on working with communities, but most of its extensive reports and surveys on communities show communities under pressure, disrupted by economic development policies, embattled by rural neglect and/or armed conflicts and often, finding means for survival difficult without government support for sustainable economic activities. Households and families in many Pacific communities are trying to survive where all or any family member, including children, may be involved in work for cash income. As the studies show, many children are engaged in sex work for income.

The concept of rural communities functioning in idyllic situations is a Pacific ideal that needs to be examined closely, using gender relations analysis of households and how they survive, and men and women's roles to support their families. Much change is happening in communities – social and political conflicts are also part of the scene. Urban communities similarly need re-definition and examination.

More urgent is the need to look at Pacific communities and cultural attitudes to children. Community attitudes and support for children's rights need to be assessed realistically and not taken as an given. From the many national studies and reports of Pacific children, Pacific communities still have a very long way to go in protecting children. Violence against children is condoned and indeed defended as a cultural necessity in some countries<sup>108</sup>; there is little sympathy or understanding for girl children when they become pregnant and parents and communities respond unsympathetically to girls and with tolerance for boys; some communities are part of the problems of shaming in the culture that can send youth to suicide. The concept of the community and its strengths and weakness, hierarchies of gender, traditional authority, religious and cultural constraints, needs to be honestly examined in children's rights work.

Sensitivity to gender relations in communities needs to be addressed if men and women are to participate without covering up gender relations and gender violence in their families in relation to children.

Differentiation needs to be applied in working with communities – who are supporters of children's rights in communities? Who opposes them? Are opposing actors' arguments discussed or ignored? How will communities best respond to protect children and girls if the culture, community and family are patriarchal? If children's programmes and work ignore gender relations and hierarchy in communities, are they also failing children?

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<sup>108</sup> Fiji debates on corporal punishment produced defences by the religious leaders, churches, parents and some teachers, on the practice as needed for children's development.

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