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Violence against the girl child
in the Pacific Islands region

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

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I. OVERVIEW

1. Introduction

The popular image of the Pacific region is of a peaceful paradise. However, in reality the Pacific is not idyllic for the girl child, who is often subjected to various forms of violence, ranging from violent punishment at home and school, to domestic violence and sexual abuse and exploitation.

The Pacific Island girl child is all too often raised to think of herself as a second class citizen and is subject to discriminatory social practices. Furthermore, in most countries of the Pacific region there is pervasive violence and a culture of secrecy which, combined with the effects of various cultural and socio-economic factors, including rapid social change, has led to increasing rates of violence against children, including sexual violence.

This paper examines the situation of the girl child in 14 Pacific Island States.¹ It begins with an overview of the Pacific region in terms of population and socio-cultural traits and trends. The status of girls and women in the region, which has particular consequences for violence and discrimination against the girl child, is then discussed. The paper then examines several cultural and socio-economic factors which contribute to raising the vulnerability of the girl child to violence, including gender inequality in socialization; discriminatory application of “custom”; early and forced marriage; and social change and poverty. Following this, the paper examines the consequences of these vulnerability-enhancing factors, which include low self-esteem and psychological damage among girls; higher risk of sexual abuse among girls; and higher rates of commercial sexual exploitation of girls. The next section of the paper summarizes the constraints to protecting the girl child from abuse and violence. In conclusion, the paper outlines a series of recommended actions for empowering the Pacific girl child.

2. Characteristics of the Pacific Islands region

The population of the Pacific Islands states ranges from around 2,000 in Niue to almost six million in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Most of the population of the Pacific region live in the four largest countries: PNG, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu.² Around 49 per cent of the total population of the Pacific Islands is aged under 20, and girls comprise around 48 per cent of that age group.

¹ The 14 Pacific States discussed in this paper are: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), The Republic of the Fiji Islands (Fiji), Kingdom of Tonga (Tonga), Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

² SPC Demography and Population Programme, 2004, “Current Pacific population dynamics and recent trends”, SPC, Noumea. Note: all of these four countries are located in the sub-region “Melanesia”. The people of Polynesia and Micronesia make up 7.4% and 6.2%, respectively, of the total Pacific-region population.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶ Most Pacific Island economies are experiencing higher rates of population growth than economic growth, which means that governments have difficulty in providing sufficient educational and health services to meet needs, particularly the needs of the large section of the population aged under 20 (which in Pacific Island countries ranges between 31 and 60 per cent of the population). The exceptions are those with continuing ties to the former administering metropolitan countries which allow free migration (such as the case of Cook Islands migration to New Zealand) or migration quotas (such as the case of Samoan migration to New Zealand). In some of these countries, such as Samoa, remittances from overseas migration constitute a significant contribution to the economy. See: Situation Analysis papers commissioned by UNICEF Pacific 2003-2005 for Cook Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Marshall Islands and FSM.

⁷ The study *Poverty and Access to Infrastructure in Papua New Guinea* by Gibson and Rozelle (2002), found that poverty is primarily rural in PNG and associated with poor access to services, markets and transportation. Access to education had the most significant long-term effect on poverty reduction.

underemployment among youth,⁸ rising levels of violence and violent crime, the loss of community norms and subsistence resources. At the same time, internal male migration⁹ and complete dependence on money for livelihoods are contributing to a fragmentation of families.¹⁰

3. The status of girls and women in the Pacific Islands

The three sub-regions of the Pacific, Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia, differ somewhat in the role and place of girls and women in society. These differences account for variations in the well-being and opportunities of the girl child across the region.

Traditionally, all Pacific societies were ranked by social rather than economic status. Within Melanesia, societies were ranked by gender and in these countries (PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and parts of Fiji) there is far greater gender inequality than in the countries of the other Pacific sub-regions. In general, this meant that men controlled resources and made decisions while girls and women performed most of the productive as well as all the household labour.

The low status of girls in some Melanesian societies was apparent in traditions such as arranged marriages and “bride price”. Girls were – and in many areas still are – regarded as a valuable resource to be traded between groups of men as brides in exchange for payments, which nowadays include cash.¹¹ These traditions persist in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in spite of significant socio-cultural changes in other areas of life.

In Polynesia, and some parts of Micronesia, social inequality was not based as much on gender as on inherited chiefly status. Accordingly, a girl child born into a very high ranking family would be seen as socially superior to a man or boy of a low ranking family, although not to a man or boy of their own rank. However, social changes are today undermining the high status this gave to some girls and women.

All Polynesian and Micronesian cultures esteemed women for their fertility and their role as mothers. In these cultures, girls were generally treated more gently than boys. Furthermore, in some Polynesian cultures a girl child was not supposed to do heavy outdoor work, as it would lower the collective status of her family. At the same time, however, adolescent girls were usually denied the freedoms and choices allowed to boys

⁸ Meleisea, E. and Schoeffel, P. (forthcoming), “Youth in the Pacific Small Island Developing States”, *World Youth Report*. United Nations, New York

⁹ Foreign-operated logging, mining, petroleum and commercial fisheries industries promote male labour mobility within countries and create enclaves in which the populations are predominantly male.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald, M. H. and Howard, A., 1990, “Aspects of Social Organization in Three Samoan Communities”, *Pacific Studies*, Vol 14, No. 1, November 1990

¹¹ In Vanuatu, in an effort to control the amount of money spent on bride price, the Council of Chiefs (the Malvatumauri) issued a policy in April 2005 placing an upper limit of 80,000 Vatu on bride price (NZ\$1,066). In conjunction with the Vanuatu National Council of Women, the Council of Chiefs also ruled that bride price should be paid in traditional goods (pigs, mats and kava) rather than money. Reported by Claire Slatter, Development Alternatives with Women for a New era (DAWN), New Zealand.

and sometimes harshly treated. This strict and sometimes violent treatment was intended to ensure the protection of a girl's reputation and a family's honour. For example, in Tonga and Samoa families were – and often still are – very strict with girls and restricted their movements in an effort to prevent premarital pregnancy, which would disgrace a girl and her family and usually prevent her from making a “good” marriage.

Today, modern ideas of individual rights, women's rights and children's rights have come into conflict with customary norms based on collective interests, particularly in the male-dominated Melanesian societies. As a consequence, adolescent girls often suffer severe emotional distress over tensions between personal aspirations and the customary social expectations of them.

II. SITUATION ANALYSIS

A. Factors increasing the vulnerability of the girl child to violence

1. Gender-inequality in socialization

In Pacific Island countries children generally have the lowest status in society. Given the lack of gender equality in most countries of the Pacific, and particularly in Melanesian societies, the girl child is typically at the very bottom of the social hierarchy.

In accordance with her place in the social hierarchy, the Pacific girl child is socialized to a sense of inferiority. The socialization process of most Pacific countries has the result that girls often do not develop the notion of having a choice or an opinion, and, in countries where girls are of particularly low status in society, they are taught to never question male authority.

The socialization process of the Baruya people of PNG, where girls are trained to be extremely submissive, serves as an extreme example of the gender-inequality in the socialization of girls in the Pacific. However, it can be argued that all Pacific societies are raising their female children to believe that they have relatively little value. This gender-inequality in socialization, combined with other factors (as described below) is making girls more vulnerable to violence, particularly to sexual violence.

2. Discriminatory application of “custom”

In many Pacific Island societies, “culture” is frequently invoked as justification for discrimination against, and even violent and abusive treatment of, women and girls. However, the “customs” and “traditions” that are invoked are often distorted versions of the original, which have been modified to suit the needs of the males in the family. For example, in PNG, some fathers have used the “tradition” of bride price as a reason for

trading their daughters for cash or goods from transient logging and mining workers. In such cases, the father often conveniently overlooks other traditions and expectations associated with the bride price custom.¹² Furthermore, some groups within PNG who did not practice it in the past have adopted the bride price tradition as a way of demanding cash for the marriage of a daughter.¹³

The exercise of these traditional rights as a justification to spend the family income as they please is, in today's rapidly changing societies, often leading to undesirable social outcomes. For example, men in PNG are spending the family's cash income (derived from royalty payments or from their wife's small business) on pornography and prostitution, thereby fuelling industries which demean women and girls. The spread of pornography and its easy accessibility in many Pacific countries is believed to significantly increase the risks to the girl child of becoming a victim of sexual violence.¹⁴

3. Early and forced marriage

The legal age at which girls can marry in the Pacific is usually between 14 and 16 years old.¹⁵ However, in some countries, such as PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, customary law remains very strong in some parts, and allows girls to be married at puberty – at around 12 or 13 years old.

Evidence indicates that such early marriage is not only a health risk for girls, but puts girls at high risk of physical abuse, as they move outside of their relatively protected family environment to live with their husband and his extended family.¹⁶

4. Social acceptance of violent punishment of children

Most countries of the Pacific, if not all, accept violent punishment, mockery, ridicule, public humiliation and severe verbal abuse of boys and girls as valid forms of discipline. Even in countries where corporal punishment is illegal, such as Marshall Islands and Fiji, violent punishment of children is accepted both at home and at schools. A study of parental practices in Fiji found that in punishing their children, hitting,

¹² HELP Resources, Inc, and UNICEF (PNG), 2005, *A Situation Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse and the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Papua New Guinea*, UNICEF Pacific, Suva (commissioned by UNESCAP).

¹³ HELP Resources, Inc, and UNICEF (PNG), 2005.

¹⁴ HELP Resources, Inc, and UNICEF (PNG), 2005

¹⁵ US Department of State, 2005, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices", <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/c17093.htm>. In PNG and Solomon Islands girls can marry at 14 with consent, and 16 without consent. In most other countries the minimum age of marriage, with consent, is higher (15-16).

¹⁶ HELP Resources, Inc, and UNICEF (PNG), 2005.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁰ Plange, Nii-K, et. al., 2006?, "Pacific Child Protection Study: Overview report on child protection practice in Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa", Pacific Children's Programme; See also UNICEF Situation Analysis Reports (2003-2005) for Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands, FSM, Nauru and Niue.

²¹ In New Zealand, smacking children is illegal and Pacific Islanders are particularly liable to be accused by police and teachers of violence to their children.

²² Schoeffel, P., Meleisea, M., David, R., Kalauni, R., Kalolo, K., Kingi, P., Taumoeolau, T., Vuetibau, L., & Williams, S., 1996, Pacific Islands Polynesian attitudes to child training and discipline in New Zealand: Some policy implications for social welfare and education. *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 6, 134-147

²³ Save the Children (Fiji), 2006, p. 8.

²⁴ The Pacific Children's Programme, (funded by AusAID) conducted baseline studies on knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and practice (KABP) on child protection in Fiji (2003), Samoa (2004), and Vanuatu (2003).

5. Preservation of a culture of silence surrounding sexual abuse

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

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

In some countries (PNG, Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomons) sexual abuse also occurs in schools. In PNG girls are often withdrawn from school when they reach puberty because of parental concerns that they will be sexually harassed or abused by teachers and male students.

Sexual abuse also often occurs when girls leave their immediate family and live with relatives. Reasons for leaving include: lack of schools near their home, lack of employment opportunities in their village, or being “adopted” by a family member (to be an additional source of labour).

For example, in Fiji, a survey of children who were living with their extended families while attending school found that, of girls who dropped out of school, 26 percent reported having been sexually abused by male relatives while living away from home.²⁸

Although the problem of sexual abuse is widespread in Pacific societies, there is a tendency to deny that the problem could be home-grown and to assume that sexual abuse of children is only committed by foreigners. This is because it is much easier to report criminal sexual behaviour of a foreigner, if it can be detected, and to punish him or her, than it is if the abuser is a local.

Even when child sexual abuse is reported to the police, the reports may be ignored or dropped, often because police are not adequately trained to respond to these reports, as

²⁵ Five country studies of commercial sexual exploitation of children and child sexual abuse were commissioned by UNICEF Pacific and UNESCAP in 2004-2005 for Fiji, Kiribati, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

²⁶ In Niue, a victim of child sexual abuse and her family were forced to leave the country to escape ostracism after reporting a case of child sexual abuse. See: UNICEF, 2004(d), “A Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women: Niue”, UNICEF Pacific, Suva, p. 44.

²⁷ UNICEF, 2005(a), “A Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women: Kiribati”, UNICEF Pacific, Suva

²⁸ Save the Children (Fiji). 2004. “The Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse of Children in Fiji: A Situational Analysis”, (commissioned by UNESCAP)

well as because of pressure on complainants to drop the charges. For example, in a village in Niue, three girls under the age of 15 became pregnant to older family members. The police did not pursue the matter and there were, consequently, no official repercussions for the offenders.²⁹

Where the rapist is a man of influence or high status, the police may refuse to take action. In some cases the police themselves are perpetrators, as has been reported in PNG, for example.³⁰

In certain instances, the sexual abuse of a child is condoned in the context of defending family pride. For example “revenge rape” still occurs in several Pacific countries. In such cases a group of men or youths rape a girl to punish her father or brothers. Sexual assaults on girls to rupture her hymen may also be perpetrated to force them into marriage; the rape being seen to culturally “devalue” the girl by taking her virginity.³¹

Sexual abuse of girls is reportedly worst in regions where there have been violent civil conflicts and little law and order, such as Bougainville in PNG and in the Solomon islands.

6. Limited access to reproductive health information

Although older generations of women were quite disadvantaged, today girls and boys in most Pacific countries, participate in basic education in fairly equal proportions, with the exception of some countries in Melanesia.

However, even those girls who have access to education are usually not taught about reproductive health and they do not receive any empowerment training or education about children’s and women’s rights.

Reproductive health education is rarely provided in Pacific Island schools because of taboos regarding sexual matters, and beliefs that this kind of education will encourage sexual experimentation among school children. While this may or may not be the case, studies indicate that the lack of reproductive health education often leads to a higher risk of children and youth getting pregnant or contracting STIs. Studies suggest that the lack

²⁹ UNICEF, 2004(d), “A Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women: Niue”, UNICEF Pacific, Suva, p. 41

³⁰ Amnesty International Amnesty International, 2006(a), *Papua New Guinea – Violence against Women: Not Inevitable, Never Acceptable!*, Amnesty International

³¹ The ethnographic literature on Samoa and Tonga contains many instances of this practice. Dr Digim’Rina, an anthropologist from the University of Papua New Guinea, also reports the practice in the Southern Highlands of PNG, where older men have monopolised the market for young brides, and young men have tried to compete or assert prior claim by assaulting girl children to rupture their hymen and thus “devalue” them.

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

7. Social change, internal migration and poverty

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

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

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

At the same time, urbanization is leading to the creation of informal settlements in urban areas which often have poor services, high rates of unemployment and violent crime, and little law and order. Girl children living in such areas are at high risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.³⁷

³² Save the Children (Fiji), 2004; Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), 2004.

³³ UNICEF, 2004(b), "Situation Report on Children, Youth and Women in the Federated States of Micronesia", UNICEF Pacific, Suva.

³⁴ Wan Smol Bag and the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), 2004, "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Child Sexual Abuse in Vanuatu", Unpublished report, commissioned by UNICEF Pacific

³⁵ *Kava* is a traditional drink, made from the root of the pepper plant, which is mildly narcotic.

³⁶ Pacific Children's Programme, 2003, "Child Protection in Vanuatu: A Report of a Baseline Study on Knowledge, Attitudes, Behaviours and Practices"; Christian Care Centre of the Church of Melanesia and the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), 2004; UNICEF, 2003, "A Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women: Republic of the Marshall Islands", UNICEF Pacific, Suva.

³⁷ Christian Care Centre of the Church of Melanesia and RRRT, 2004.

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

B. Consequences of vulnerability of the girl child

1. High numbers of girl children engaged in child labour

As noted earlier, child labour is exploited within households in all of the Pacific countries and children are expected to become unpaid family workers at an early age. However due to the gendered division of labour discussed earlier, which usually excuses boys from work in the home, girls are far more likely than boys to be exploited and the girl child is likely to perform long hours of heavy work for her family as soon as she is physically able to do so. This is particularly the case in cultures where gender inequality is high, such as in rural Melanesia.

In the Solomon Islands and PNG where the practice of informally “adopting” girl children (for the purpose of obtaining unpaid workers) is quite common, there are many examples of abusive adoption. These girls are often mentally, physically and sexually abused in their adopted homes.³⁹

2. Higher health-risks for the girl child

With little or no reproductive health education, girls in the Pacific are increasingly at risk of contracting STIs, including HIV/AIDS. In countries which continue customary practices such as polygamy and have a large sex industry, such as PNG, girls in early adolescence are at particular risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, as they are highly sought after as additional wives by older men.

According to reports from several Pacific countries, fear of HIV is driving men to seek sexual relations with very young “clean” girls.⁴⁰ These girls are, in turn, are drawn into the sex industry by the relatively high incomes that can be earned there, in order to gain desperately needed cash for food or their families.

³⁸ HELP Resources, Inc, and UNICEF (PNG), 2005; Christian Care Centre of the Church of Melanesia and RRRT, 2004.

³⁹ Christian Care Centre of the Church of Melanesia and the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), 2004.

⁴⁰ Reported by the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre.

3. Low self-esteem and psychological damage among girls

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

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

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

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

4. Higher risk of sexual abuse among girls

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

In addition, the socialization process of girls in Pacific countries, which leads them to place little value on their own opinions, puts adolescent girls at high risk of abuse.⁴⁴ Adolescent girls who are not used to making choices or contradicting males, are

⁴¹ Moore, P., 2006, "Violence breeds violence: Let's keep children safe and secure in Fiji homes, schools and communities", Statement by Women's Action for Change (WAC) – Fiji, 1 September 2006, Suva.

⁴² UNIFEM, 2002, *Actions to end violence against women: a regional scan of the Pacific*, UNIFEM; Amnesty International, 2004, "Solomon Islands Women Confronting Violence", Amnesty International.

⁴³ Booth, H. 1999, "Pacific Island Suicide in Comparative perspective", Working Papers in Demography, No 76. Demography and Sociology Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. Canberra. Booth points out that the number of attempted suicides among young women in Samoa is in fact quite low compared to other Pacific countries; however the method chosen (paraquat weed-killer poisoning) is so effective in causing death that the rate of suicide of female youth in Samoa is very high.

⁴⁴ Police statistics from Fiji indicate that defilement of girls between the age of 11-13 years is the most common offence against children. Source: communication from Edwina Kotoisuva, Deputy Coordinator, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC). Also see: Plange, Nii-K, et. al., 2002, "Pacific Child Protection

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

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

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

Lack of support and lack of reporting of sexual abuse send a message to girls that there is no redress for such crimes and this serves to disempower them even further. Girls who have been sexually abused often run away from home, which can lead them into other abusive situations, and often leads them into becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation in order to survive.

5. Higher rates of commercial sexual exploitation of girls

The existence of commercial sexual exploitation of children appears to have increased significantly in recent years in the Pacific, due to urban poverty and unemployment, mass tourism and the rise of certain industries such as logging, mining and fishing employing large numbers of single foreign and local men. Where the primary victims are girls, as in PNG, the low status of females is also a key factor. Furthermore, in very poor households, the girl may be “sold” in pursuit of family income.⁴⁶

A study of the situation in Fiji identifies prostitution, sex tourism, pornography and adoption, all related to poverty among the victims of these activities, as the main forms of exploitation. Cases of prostitution ranged from schoolgirls exchanging sexual services for pocket-money or taxi rides, to street kids engaging in commercial sex to survive.⁴⁷

Study: Overview report on child protection practice in Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa”, Pacific Children’s Programme

⁴⁵ UNICEF, 2005(a), “A Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women: Kiribati”, UNICEF Pacific, Suva

⁴⁶ HELP Resources, Inc. and UNICEF (PNG), 2005

⁴⁷ Save the Children (Fiji), 2004, p.19

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

Vanuatu also has a significant tourism industry, but so far no direct sex-tourism has been identified. In Vanuatu, commercial sexual exploitation of girl children is associated with the sale of girls by their fathers into early marriages and with transactional sex around bars in Port Vila, mainly involving girls from poor families in urban settlements.⁴⁹

Tourism is minor in PNG and Solomon Islands the economic base of both countries rests on commercial resource extraction enclaves where large numbers of men live away from their families, and these enclaves fuel the sexual exploitation of adolescents.⁵⁰ The situation in both countries is grim. The study of child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation in the Solomon Islands provides tragic examples of the exploitation of girls in prostitution in various forms and settings.⁵¹ PNG is more worrying because it is the only Pacific Island country so far to have an HIV/AIDS pandemic.

III. CONSTRAINTS TO PROTECTION OF THE GIRL CHILD

Constraints to establishing effective programmes of action to protect girl children include lack of public sensitivity to the vulnerabilities of girl children, reflected in denial that problems exist, or insistence by opinion-makers that abuse of girl children is rare or the fault of foreigners alone.

Legal pluralism, which gives recognition to customary law (that favours men or traditional elites and which does not recognize the rights of the girl child) as well as formal law, is another constraint on the ability to protect the girl child from violence and abuse.

In PNG, for example, the formal legal system specifies that the minimum age of marriage for girls is 16 (for girls); however customary marriages are guided by "custom", determined by male-dominated village courts, which allows girls as young as 12 or 13 to marry. The conflict between them is rarely challenged in the courts because few people understand their constitutional rights.⁵²

⁴⁸ Save the Children (Fiji), 2004, pp.20-22

⁴⁹ Wan Smol Bag and the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), 2004

⁵⁰ HELP Resources, Inc. and UNICEF (PNG), 2005; Amnesty International, 2006(a).

⁵¹ Christian Care Centre of the Church of Melanesia and the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), 2004. It should be noted that prostitution is not a new phenomenon in the Solomon Islands. The practice of traditional prostitution has been documented in an anthropological study by Hogbin, H. I., 1964, *A Guadalcanal Society: The Kaoka Speakers*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.

⁵² However, in some countries customary law is being challenged. In Samoa, for example, there have been a number of challenges on the grounds of the incompatibility of customary law with the human rights guaranteed by the constitution.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV. TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT OF THE GIRL CHILD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Encouragement should be given for State Parties to accede to complementary Conventions such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Convention against Torture (CAT).
- Those countries who have not completed CEDAW reports or CRC reports should be assisted to do so.
- Assistance should be provided to train a competent government official in each country to oversee and advise government on international standards of human rights, to make reports as necessary, and to advise on international standards regarding human rights for public education.

2. Raise public awareness of the issues

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

- Public education campaigns targeting the clergy and church organizations, school teachers and law-makers, law enforcement agencies and parents.
- Community-based prevention programmes, including parenting-skills training, and education in child development and in non-violent and non-abusive methods of child discipline.
- Promotion of non-violence as a cultural value using existing community institutions, structures and linkages.
- Meaningful consultation with children and young people, particularly girl children, to plan and implement strategies to address violence and discrimination against the girl child.

3. Conduct legislative review and reform

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

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

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

- Birth registration.
- Age of marriage and legal sexual consent for girls.
- Subordination of customary laws on marriage to constitutional law and human rights law.
- Scope, definitions and penalties for sexual offences against children.
- Informal adoption practices and possible controls on the practice.
- Laws to prohibit violent or psychologically damaging punishment of children.
- Laws to prohibit commercial sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution and child pornography.
- Penalties against those who purchase sexual services, instead of against those who provide them.
- Rules of evidence and court practice and procedure for cases involving crimes against children and child witnesses,
- Legal protections to encourage the reporting of crimes against women and children.
- Laws to regulate the work of children in both the informal and formal economy.

4. Improve law enforcement

In addition to reviewing and updating laws, there is a need to improve law enforcement in the area of violence against the girl child to ensure more effective practices. Appropriate measures might include:

- Re-education of police and magistrates on the vulnerabilities of girl children and their obligations to provide protection for girls and women.
- Capacity building in the justice system on the needs and rights of victims, particularly girl children who have suffered violence, exploitation and abuse

⁶¹ For example the practice of rupturing the hymen of a girl child using the fingers classified as a lesser offence of sexual assault rather than rape, even though the consequences for the girl may be as severe as sexual penetration.

- Gender-sensitive and child sensitive court proceedings.
- Identification and appointment of police and justice personnel to specialise in cases of sexual abuse, assault and rape.
- Establishment of police sexual assault and family violence units, with links to a specialized hospital unit.
- Improvement of forensic expertise of police and prosecutors, and procedures for investigation, gathering and securing evidence regarding sexual abuse, assault and rape.
- Training of more women for positions in the judiciary and police.

5. Develop policies and strategies

Governments and NGOs need to develop policies and strategies to address the vulnerability of girl children, with emphasis on the following:

- The upcoming “Third Pacific Ministerial Meeting on Women” and “East Asia-Pacific Ministerial Consultation on Children”, to be held in May 2007, in New Caledonia and Fiji respectively, offer an opportunity for leaders in the region to address issues faced by the girl child.
- Policy development on gender and family violence by Pacific Island governments.
- Women’s non-government organizations need to include the girl child specifically into their regional and national policy platforms.
- Increased emphasis on policy and action programmes to prevent child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation including child sex tourism.
- More substantive policy-oriented research on gender socialization of children in Pacific Island countries to better understand how gender identities are formed from early childhood onwards.

UNIFEM Pacific and UNICEF Pacific are ready to work collaboratively on this issue, in particular to address the mother-daughter relationship, as a preventive strategy.

6. Make formal education accessible and relevant

- More vigorous efforts to implement national policies on the education of girls in countries where gender barriers to education still exist: PNG, Solomons and Vanuatu.

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

7. Encourage donor support

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

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