

Vanuatu case study in women's economic empowerment

This case study was developed as part of the evaluation of Australian aid support for women's economic empowerment conducted by the Office of Development Effectiveness. It is based on information collected from informant interviews and group discussions during the field visit to Vanuatu, as well as a review of relevant Vanuatu country program and initiative documents. The case study examines successful approaches to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment pursued at the country program level and within initiatives. It discusses what these efforts have achieved and identifies key challenges that have limited effectiveness.



The owner of Lakatoro Palm Lodge on Malekula island, Vanuatu. This bungalow owner, like many others, has received training and support from the DFAT-funded technical and vocational education and training program. *Photo: Ashleigh Connor, DFAT.*

Overview: context for gender in Vanuatu and the Australian aid program

Vanuatu's economy has been growing steadily since the early 2000s, largely propelled by tourism, construction and high commodity prices.¹ Vanuatu's size, island geography, and cultural diversity pose unique challenges for development.² Approximately 77 per cent of Vanuatu's population lives in rural areas, where there is limited access to markets, schools and government services, and where infrastructure and roads are poor. Small-scale agriculture is the main livelihood for 80 per cent of the population.³ About 13 per cent of the population lives below the national poverty line, and the majority of the population lack access to employment opportunities, and high quality education and health services.⁴ The country is ranked 124 out of 187 countries in the human development index.⁵

Women and girls are disadvantaged in significant ways in Vanuatu.⁶ While girls have caught up to boys in school enrolment and girls' secondary enrolment rates now exceed those of boys, women remain underrepresented in vocational, technical and tertiary education.⁷ Rates of domestic violence against women are high.⁸ In 2011, 61 per cent of women were in the labour force, working mostly in agriculture.⁹ They represent just 33 per cent of workers in the formal sector;¹⁰ they are mostly self-employed in microenterprises or in agriculture.

Australian aid programming priorities in Vanuatu are linked to the Vanuatu Government's goals for growth, and governed by the Australia–Vanuatu Partnership for Development. The priority areas of collaboration are education, health services, infrastructure development, reform on economic governance issues, and increasing the effectiveness of legal institutions, which also addresses gender-based violence.¹¹ Infrastructure and economic governance comprise about 35 per cent of Australia's bilateral spending in Vanuatu. The aid program has a land-rights initiative that pursues gender equality and an initiative that supports women's leadership. Programming under education also includes technical and vocational education and training.

A sizeable 89 per cent of Australian aid programming is reported to have a direct focus on gender equality. The Partnership for Development includes 'addressing equality of opportunity for all men and women' as a priority development goal. However, unlike for other goals, specific activities and targets to meet this goal are not mapped out. The priority action agenda of the Vanuatu Government addresses gender in terms of equal access to education and health services, with mention of equal access to non-agricultural jobs and women's representation in decision-making bodies. However, interviews conducted during the field visit indicate that, in spite of this formal commitment, women's equality and economic empowerment are not key government priorities for action,¹² and the government's support for women in business has been limited.¹³

Successful approaches to addressing women's economic empowerment in initiatives

The Australian aid program contributes to gender equality and a supporting environment for women's economic empowerment throughout its portfolio. Australian investments in education and health care are helping to build the basic resources and preconditions that women need to contribute economically.

The scholarship program, as in other countries, has firm targets for women's equity in selection and contributes to women's leadership and economic potential. The Australian aid program addresses issues of law and justice, and protection against gender-based violence through support for reform of the law and justice sector in Vanuatu and support for local organisations working for gender equality and rights for women. These organisations include the Women's Centre in Vanuatu, which works with

and advocates for survivors of gender-based violence, and Wan Smol Bag, which provides community services for young women and men as well as engaging in social communications in a variety of media on themes including gender equality, gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health. A land-rights initiative, Mama Graon, may also contribute to women's economic empowerment by protecting women's access and control over productive assets.

Australia's direct support for economic sector activities is almost entirely through mainstreamed initiatives. These include the Governance for Growth initiative focussed on macroeconomic reform, support for reform of the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector and the infrastructure sector, including new methods of maintaining roads through the Vanuatu Transport Sector Strengthening Program. In addition, some regional initiatives, such as the Enterprise Challenge Fund (ECF), include economic activities in Vanuatu. ECF funds innovative private-sector projects with the potential for social impact that need subsidies to grow to scale.

In addition to these mainstreamed initiatives, some regional initiatives are working in a more targeted way on women's leadership. For example, the **Pacific Leadership Program, Emerging Pacific Women's Leadership Program** (PLP EPWLP), jointly funded by Australia and New Zealand, sponsored a project to work with associations of market vendors. These organisations already existed, but the initiative facilitated the creation of a network among representatives of all organisations on Efate, the main island. It also promoted training for market association representatives and market women, and meetings between local authorities and market women. The organiser of this work said that it was the first time these women had been able to speak and have a local government official listen to their issues.¹⁴ Additional targeted work in women's economic empowerment and leadership is being planned through the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development initiative. Conversations during the field visit indicate that there are entry points for direct, targeted economic work with women particularly in areas where they have been traditionally active, such as work in the market. Moreover, the experience of PLP EPWLP shows that work in the economic sectors can also be used as an entry point for work in leadership.

Mainstreamed program designs can work to economically empower women by addressing key barriers that women face. In the most successful approaches, gender was a key component in both design and implementation. However for some initiatives, more targeted approaches may still be needed to consolidate gains for women.

The Vanuatu **TVET Sector Strengthening Program** (TSSP) was an innovative model for demand-based provision of TVET in rural areas.¹⁵ The TSSP did not specifically target women. However, its focus on providing inclusive, demand-driven TVET training addressed barriers that are particularly important to women. Consultation not only with provincial governments but also with communities and civil organisations helped to ensure that training met real needs. The training had a flexible, modular design that was appropriate for adult learners who cannot leave their other responsibilities for long periods of time to train. Ongoing mentoring was provided for some training, which has shown to be particularly valuable to women entrepreneurs.¹⁶ People could participate in training even if they lacked formal education or high levels of literacy.

Although TVET did not target women, it was not blind to gender. A gender equality focus was important from design through implementation. A variety of strategies were employed, beginning with the implementation team's own staffing. Strong women staff took leadership roles, and acceptance of gender equity and ability to work with women was important for inclusion on the implementation team. The design specified other critical measures, including:

- › gender awareness training for all TVET centre personnel
- › development of a Gender Access and Equity Strategy to guide TVET centre policies and procedures

- › gender-sensitive approaches to employment counselling
- › consideration of gender equity in proposed employment outcomes, with affirmative action in training for specific occupations with a high gender imbalance
- › provision of life-skills training and gender-sensitive counselling
- › promotion of health awareness, including sexual and reproductive health
- › outreach to non-government organisation groups to recruit trainees
- › ensuring written materials and publications were gender neutral
- › development of communication strategies that promote the value of women's participation in TVET
- › inclusion of optimal standards for gender balance in the TVET Centre Program Procedures Manual.

In implementation, TSSP used multiple strategies to encourage women's participation in the training. One was to reach out to organisations providing services to women, such as VANWODS Microfinance Inc, to identify and meet their training needs. On Malekula island, a woman trained by TVET went on to organise a women's saving cooperative in her village, which also became a channel for recruiting other women for TVET training. The TVET centres created training for new livelihoods activities whilst also supporting women in activities they were already engaged in, such as tourism and horticulture. Women were also actively encouraged to participate in training in nontraditional areas. In nontraditional sectors, the TSSP attempted to find women trainers: for example, in Sanma a female instructor from the Vanuatu Institute of Technology led a session on laying tiles. TVET centre staff also actively encouraged communities to recruit women to training. If the community submitted a list of candidates that included few women, TVET centre staff would ask them to supplement it.¹⁷

Another effective strategy recommended in the design and used by the TSSP was to develop 'communication strategies that promote the value of women's participation in the TVET system'.¹⁸ Women's leadership in the program staff and the public support of male staff subtly modelled social norm change.¹⁹ Photographs of women as entrepreneurs and in nontraditional jobs (such as construction) were used on promotional materials to demonstrate that women could do these jobs and that it was acceptable to do so. Video vignettes of women who had successfully completed training were developed to show that TVET worked for women. Staff deemed this approach more important than reports in changing ideas.

The other initiatives reviewed also showed the potential of mainstreamed initiatives to create results for women. **Governance for Growth** (GFG) had a range of objectives, including supporting policy reform and government service delivery, and included subprograms in a number of areas such as energy, telecommunications, transport, national statistics and tourism.²⁰ Delivery mechanisms include grants to government, incentive funding, partnering with multilateral agencies and direct technical assistance.

Gender was an important focus of design, with the program being developed in dialogue with men and women, a feature that emphasised that the priorities for men and women and impacts from policy reform and investment were not always the same.²¹ It was planned that gender be addressed in implementation through targeted research, gender awareness raising in the sector, gender budgeting in public expenditure improvements, and followup subprojects. The project also planned to incorporate gender equality performance in annual reviews. In practice however, stand-alone gender analysis was not completed, as it was not a government priority, but gender was incorporated into assessments of the impact of other sectors.

The aid program captures its contributions to women's empowerment through a strong M&E system.

The TSSP in Malampa and Samna provinces produced positive results for women. Although gender equity in training was not achieved, for accredited courses, women made up 36 per cent of 1578 total

trainees in Sanma and 42 per cent of 1327 total trainees in Malampa. For business development services, women made up 62 per cent of 1281 total trainees in Sanma and 32 per cent of 676 total trainees in Malampa.²² The final report noted that this level of participation represented 'important new opportunities' for women, given their lower labour force participation and schooling than men.²³

While male trainees were more likely than female trainees to report increased income and greater livelihood opportunities, female trainees had a higher proportional change in median income than male trainees. An external analysis of impact using two household expenditure surveys found that women-headed households had disproportionate improvements in some kinds of income generation in communities where TSSP training took place.²⁴ One year after receiving training, 91 per cent of self-employed women interviewed reported increased profits, and 70 per cent had introduced new business services. Women who were trained in tourism were particularly successful in business.²⁵

The GFG contributed to impressive results that benefited men as well as women. In telecommunications, there was an increase in mobile phone coverage from 25 per cent of the population in 2006 to 90 per cent in 2010, along with a reduction in the gender gap. However, men were still more likely to own a phone than women in rural areas and to use it for work.²⁶ Gender gaps in internet usage are also likely. Staff at a pilot internet access point sponsored by GFG on Malekula said that although both men and women from the community could use the facility, in practice it was mostly used by men. To fully include women in the benefits of the program, additional targeted activities will be needed. The sex-disaggregated data being collected by GFG, and continued gender analysis, will help identify these gaps with more precision, as well as identify entry points.

Box 3 Good practice: gender barriers can be tackled in vocational and skills training

Although technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is not a part of the economic sector, it has important implications for women's capacity to access and successfully engage in entrepreneurship and employment opportunities. In Vanuatu, technical and vocational training is critical, given that women's labour force participation is high (61 per cent), but women lag behind men in tertiary education and have lower levels of earnings.

The TVET Sector Strengthening Program (TSSP) phase II in Vanuatu is strengthening in vocational training through a decentralised approach in two provinces, Malampa and Sanma. As part of this approach the managing contractor has consulted with civil society and the local businesses to assess training needs. Training has focused on business development, financial literacy and a range of technical areas, such as tourism and raising livestock. The project has effectively addressed gender in design and implementation through some creative and innovative gender-responsive approaches. The strong commitment of the TVET leadership team to pursue gender equality was a critical feature in the program's success, despite a lack of strong gender equality objectives in the original design.

The initiative has:

- › promoted women's involvement in nontraditional vocations, such as tiling and grouting
- › actively sought to attract women applicants, including by engaging a women-centred microfinance provider, VANWODS Microfinance, to help recruit women
- › held modular and flexible delivery strategies that allow multiple entry and exit points, enabling women to balance training with employment and domestic responsibilities, and work towards a certified qualification in a timeframe responsive to the demands on their time
- › promoted women's representation in training for occupations with a high gender imbalance
- › trained all program staff in gender and actively sought to promote women into managerial positions to challenge cultural stereotyping
- › invested time in developing male gender champions, within both the project staff and local civil and government counterparts, to facilitate social norm change in a highly patriarchal context
- › offered trainees gender-responsive employment counselling and mentorship
- › paid for child care services in some instances, to enable women to attend savings training
- › placed a strong emphasis on accessible and popular program communications, including dissemination of DVDs, posters and illustrated short reports that project strong, positive images of women in nontraditional vocational and leadership roles.

Challenges to addressing gender equality and women's economic empowerment

There is not strong or overt political or cultural support for promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment in Vanuatu. Therefore, while Australian aid programming has included a strong focus on gender, results have been mixed.

Discussions with stakeholders revealed systematic agreement that addressing gender equality was challenging in Vanuatu. It was reported that there was a pervasive mentality against women's economic empowerment and that views on gender were extreme and divided. Stakeholders agreed that donors are limited in the role they can play and should not tackle the issue head-on but rather work indirectly, preferably through their own programs.²⁷ Moreover, even when program designs included gender, implementation was often a problem.²⁸ A commonly held view was that the best way to lead on this issue was by demonstrating effectiveness, thereby gaining male acceptance and potentially male champions.

Within this context, the Australian aid program still endeavours to incorporate gender into key areas of investment. The program does not have a country gender strategy, but it has a gender focal point within each of its five thematic programs, as well as an additional gender focal point who acts as an overall liaison.²⁹ This helps to ensure that gender is integrated into work in each sector, as well as into individual initiatives.

The roads initiative is typical of the challenges and mixed results on gender in Vanuatu. This initiative introduced a new contract-based system of road maintenance. Although gender was not emphasised in the design, steps were taken in implementation to improve the equality of employment created in roads projects. Women do not participate in heavier work, but they do participate in road maintenance including cutting and weeding. Efforts to promote gender equality included collecting sex-disaggregated data to measure women's participation as contractors and in winning bids; specifically inviting female contractors to apply for employment; and, later in the program, requiring contractors to have at least one woman who could be a manager or an accountant. Participation of women in road crews was also encouraged. However, implementing staff found that over time, women on the teams were let go, and levels of women's participation fell. This was because once contracts were awarded, staff had little influence on who was hired. In all, women filled 14 per cent of the labour days of the project.

The experience with the **Enterprise Challenge Fund** (ECF) also reveals mixed results in effectively addressing gender equality and advancing women's economic empowerment through a mainstreamed approach. The ECF was a regional program in East Asia and the Pacific which funded four projects in Vanuatu. The initiative tried to address gender equality by encouraging equal participation of women and men on review panels and staff, and by including gender impact in project selection criteria. However, it proved difficult to attract women to the panels. The midterm and independent reviews found that the design did not strategically address gender and that the gender criteria were too weak to be effective. .

Yet despite these findings, projects funded by the initiative reached women. Overall, the initiative reports that 22 139 women, or 51 per cent of total beneficiaries across all countries, were women, with 12 of the 21 projects being cited as having contributed to women's economic empowerment.³⁰ The numbers of female beneficiaries in Vanuatu were lower: the 2012 ECF portfolio report noted benefits including 7 staff positions for women (15 per cent of the total), 15 women gaining other employment (100 per cent of the total), and 1193 female suppliers benefiting from improved value chains (74 per cent of the total).³¹

An independent progress report (which rated initiatives for gender equality in terms of access to and control over resources, decision-making, women's rights and capacity building) gave the four projects in Vanuatu an average score of just 2 on a scale of 1 to 6, where 6 is very high quality and 1 is very low quality. This compares with an average of 3.5 across the 11 projects reviewed. In Cambodia the average was 4.75, and in Solomon Islands it was 3.8.³²

The discrepancies in ratings indicate that a more 'hands-off' aid delivery approach can produce acceptable equality outcomes in some contexts, but not others. It also points to the importance of systematically looking at who benefits at different levels and being aware of differences in results between different areas, as well as between men and women.

Measuring beyond outcomes to results and impacts is necessary to show economic empowerment for women. Sex-disaggregated data of program outputs and outcomes and consideration of gender in reporting is a first step in helping initiatives improve their performance in reaching women.

An important element of the four key initiatives reviewed in Vanuatu was that, where relevant, they collected sex-disaggregated data. Three of the four initiatives examined impacts on women in their reporting, and two examined differences between impacts on men and women.

The nature of services provided by the TSSP makes collection and monitoring of some gender disaggregated data relatively straightforward, as implementers can immediately record how many women and men attended training. The TVET centre in Malampa, however, went beyond simply recording data to posting the number of men and women enrolled in each course on the centre's whiteboards, so that all staff were made aware of how different types of training classes were performing in terms of gender equity in participation. In addition to the sex-disaggregated data, tracer studies of participants and evaluation reports looked at effects separately for men and women.

For the roads program, collection of sex-disaggregated data began midway through the initiative after the need to collect sex-disaggregated data was noted in the 2010 QAI report. The figures allowed the team to quantify the relatively low participation of women and provide motivation to improve it. Baseline data is not available on how many women traditionally participate in road maintenance; however, the figures can be compared with results in comparable initiatives and used to provide a benchmark for improvement. Several promising steps have been made towards improving gender equity in phase II. This includes an additional staff member who acts as a community liaison officer for cross-cutting issues, including gender,³³ and a requirement that gender equality data will be reported in the managing contractor's quarterly reports.³⁴

For ECF, on the other hand, collecting quality sex-disaggregated data was especially challenging. Many indicators were not straightforward to collect, such as the number of casual labourers employed, the number of women in the supply chain who benefited, and the number of women who benefited from a product or service provided. In many cases, the private enterprises that were expected to report data did not have the capacity or the resources to provide credible estimates for some indicators. The midterm review noted that many had simply reported a 50-50 split in the number of estimated total beneficiaries.³⁵ Collecting sex-disaggregated data was not addressed in the design document (which did not emphasise gender). Rather, it was only after the initiative had started that the implementing contractor designed a more gender-responsive M&E system and worked with partners to collect and report data. While the initiative began in 2007, sex-disaggregated data were only reported in the 2012 review.³⁶

The ECF provides a concrete example of how the presence of gender indicators that are taken seriously can influence the integration of gender into the program. The ECF women's economic empowerment review reported that asking project implementers to show how their initiatives were addressing gender encouraged partners to take stock of the gender component of their initiatives and try to improve it.³⁷

Simply reporting the number of women who benefited does not however provide context to understand how and to what extent gender was mainstreamed, and what if any, barriers existed.

For both TVSSP and ECF, reporting on gender in midterm reports and QAIs appeared to be instrumental in encouraging an increased focus on gender in the initiatives. These reports noted issues with implementation of gender that the initiatives then began to address.

Multiple barriers to economic advancement may need to be addressed to produce results.

The TVET final report highlighted some impressive results for women. Particular success was reported by women who were trained in tourism. Some of these women saw their annual income increase by a factor of five.

The example of tourism training illustrates how multiple barriers may need to be addressed to achieve good results. In the case of women-operated tourism bungalows, several other factors in addition to TVET training contributed to the results. For example, a new booking service operated by a government tourism office, the Malampa call centre, was established in the same period and arranged internet and phone bookings for the guest houses. Without this service, guests would find it very difficult to book a room in these lodges or even find them, because they typically have only a couple of rooms, minimal infrastructure, no internet access, are not all centrally located and there is little public transport on the island. The contribution of the Malampa call centre in turn depended on the availability of internet and cell phone communications, as well as the presence of a motivated representative of the Provincial Tourism Board. Other factors also contributed. For one woman who ran a bungalow, an initial loan obtained by her husband enabled them to build their guest house, underlining the importance of access to financial services. Australia helped to address some of these other barriers, notably telecommunications and roads. The Vanuatu Government and VANWODS Microfinance Inc are providing other important supporting infrastructure.

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