

**GENDERED IMPACTS OF GLOBAL ECONOMIC SHOCKS: FINDINGS  
FROM HOUSEHOLDS IN MELANESIA**

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This paper examines the gendered impacts of multiple severe global economic shocks in two Melanesian countries: Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. It focuses on the sharp food and fuel price hikes in 2007 and 2008 and the subsequent Global Financial Crisis, which quickly turned into a broader economic crisis. Using gender-disaggregated data, it examines the impacts on women across three economic spheres: financial, productive, and reproductive. Findings indicate that a disproportionate burden of the adjustment to these shocks was borne by women. Without gender-disaggregation and a focus on gender norms, policies risk being at best incomplete and at worst harmful to women. Therefore, formal social protection schemes must account for gender norms, focusing on practical and achievable measures to advance women's economic empowerment within

existing institutional structures. Possible policies include financial inclusion, developing better and safer informal markets, lifting agricultural production, and devising more family-friendly labor-migration schemes.

SINCE THE TURN OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM, the global economy has been beset by a number of important global financial and macroeconomic shocks. In 2007 and 2008, the international prices of both food and fuel rose sharply, comparable with the inflationary spikes associated with the oil price shocks of the early 1970s. These rises were then dramatically reversed with the onset of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and the subsequent Global Economic Crisis (GEC) in mid-2008, in which global production contracted sharply and the volume of trade between countries fell for the first time since World War II.

Empirical evidence points to the considerable consequences of these severe shocks. Spikes in imported inflation undermined real household disposable incomes and stretched households' reserves and resilience (Brinkman et al. 2010; Gibson and Kim 2013). The subsequent shock weakened demand for goods, services, and labor. In the Asia-Pacific region alone, almost twenty-five million workers were affected by labor shedding in trade-exposed industries (UNESCAP 2009). The ensuing recession may have prevented sixty-four million people in Asia from emerging out of poverty and pushed 50,000 additional people into poverty in the Pacific (Chatterjee and Kumar 2010).

Often neglected in the orthodox economics literature on macroeconomic shocks is how women and men are affected differently, as well as the transmission of shocks to broader, nonmonetary aspects of well-being, such as unpaid work (Fukuda-Parr, Heintz, and Seguino 2013). Thus, although income and employment impacts of crises are generally well documented, often masked is the dynamics at the intrahousehold level. Social protection policies, thus, risk being gender blind, disregarding the particular and unique vulnerabilities of women. Policies may also be less effective than might otherwise be the case, because intrahousehold dynamics are critical to understanding the vulnerability and resilience of households (Moser 1998). Therefore, access to gendered data, and attention to gender norms, are needed to reveal the different experiences of women and men.

This paper focuses on the gendered impacts of the aforementioned shocks. It contributes to the existing literature by disaggregating the impacts by gender and exploring the impacts beyond employment. It does so for two Pacific Island Countries (PICs) in which the gendered impacts of shocks are rarely explored and where, for some dimensions, the highest rates of gender inequality in the world prevail: Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

To a large extent these countries are emblematic of PICs more broadly: comprising small populations scattered on islands across vast tracts of ocean; with undiversified economies reliant on world markets; entrenched inequalities

between women and men; and with dualistic economic structures, consisting of traditional economic systems in rural areas coexisting alongside a market economy in fast-growing urban areas. These urban areas, in turn, are increasingly becoming centers of wealth, employment, politics, and service provision as well as hubs of poverty and inequality (Storey 2006).

Further, both countries are also renowned for their acute vulnerability to economic and natural shocks, often ranking among the world's most vulnerable countries on international league tables (Feeny et al. 2013). This heightened vulnerability makes Solomon Islands and Vanuatu important contexts for studying the gendered effects of the crises. The broad structural similarities with other countries across the region means that findings may well have implications for the design of social protection policies in PICs more broadly to strengthen the resilience of women to future shocks.

Drawing on extensive empirical quantitative and qualitative data collected in six geographically and economically distinct locations in each country, this paper focuses on the different experiences of women and men during and after the shocks in question. It considers the effects of the shocks across three economic spheres: financial; productive; and reproductive, in line with the conceptual framework of Elson (2010). In each sphere it brings together the empirical quantitative data and the results of participatory exercises on possible policy options. To the author's knowledge this is the first time that such a detailed gender-disaggregated analysis of economic shocks has been undertaken in either country or in the region more broadly. The findings show that food and fuel price shocks rather than the GFC/GEC had the greatest gendered impacts in these countries and that women bore a disproportionate burden of the adjustment.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: a literature review followed by the data and methodology and the findings across three economic spheres; next a discussion of a number of policy implications raised by the findings of the paper and finally the conclusion.

### **Literature Review**

Elson (2010) argues that economic shocks are inherently gendered. Financial crises emanate from gendered economic processes, whereas the impacts of shocks are also gendered because they affect women and men differently. Impacts manifest differently for women and men across a number of economic spheres and result from both differences in the way women and men respond to various policies as well as the influence of gender norms and institutions. In many developing countries, women experience inequality and subjugation within their households, communities, and societies. These preexisting inequities can be reinforced during a shock, both via the specific trajectory of the

shock, as well as via the way that people respond, especially because vulnerabilities based on gender are generally both multidimensional and relational (Harper, Jones, McKay, and Epey 2009; King and Sweetman 2010). For example, women in many countries face institutional constraints that limit their ability to develop their own human capital and to access labor market opportunities or credit, in turn making it significantly more difficult for women to respond to shocks (Ezemenari, Chaudhury, and Owens 2002). These constraints can be worsened by widespread economic shocks, which often affect labor markets, leading men to migrate or remain unemployed and leaving women to fill gaps in both the labor market and the household (Chant 2007).

A main focus of empirical studies into the gendered impacts of macroeconomic shocks has centered on how the shock affected employment opportunities for women and men. For example, in the aftermath of the GFC/GEC women's labor market vulnerabilities were reflected by their disproportionate representation in badly hit export sectors during the contraction in global trade, such as garment, textile, and clothing industries (Silva 2009; Gaerlan, Cabrera, Samia, and Santoalla 2010; Otobe 2011; Pearson and Sweetman 2011; Espino 2013). It has been repeatedly observed that women were more likely to lose their jobs because of employment in unstable sectors as well as discriminatory firing practices (Parks, Abbott, and Wilkinson 2009; Green, King, and Miller-Dawkins 2010; King and Sweetman 2010; Seguino 2010). Pollock and Aung (2010) highlight the particular vulnerabilities of migrant women in Thailand, who experienced decreases in wages, lay-offs, increased restrictions on reproductive rights, and increased risks of harassment and extortion as a result of the economic downturn. Ortiz and Cummins (2013) also find that the subsequent austerity measures, commonly carried out from 2010 in response to the GFC/GEC, are likely to have had a disproportionately negative impact on women and children.

The experiences of women in developing countries following economic shocks stand in contrast to those of women in developed countries like the United States and most of Western Europe. In developed countries, male unemployment typically increased more than female unemployment because male-dominated sectors, such as finance, manufacturing, and construction, were hardest hit by the GFC/GEC (Otobe 2011; Berik and Kongar 2013). Cho and Newhouse (2013) also confirmed this finding for 17 middle-income countries. In middle-income economies, however, women were often the ones undertaking the extra work burden to compensate for the loss of household income (KayaBahçe and Memiş 2013).

These findings echo evidence from previous crises where there were disproportionate gendered impacts at both the macro and microeconomic levels. For example, the Asian Crisis of 1997, which was the last widespread adverse macroeconomic shock in the region prior to the GFC/GEC, resulted in women bearing

a disproportionate burden of the fall in employment, as well as in education with a larger reduction in school attendance for girls (Aslanbeigui and Summerfield 2000). Women were also more prone to deteriorating in health (attributable to higher costs of medicine and health care). The aforementioned study also found an increased incidence of violence against women as well as increasing religious tensions. Aslanbeigui and Summerfield (2000) confirmed an increase in the rate of domestic violence as well as prostitution as a result of the crisis.

#### *Economic Shocks and Gender in PICs*

What is clear from the existing literature is that gendered impacts not only vary across income level and region but also across individual countries depending on the preexisting economic, social, and cultural relationships (Green, King, and Miller-Dawkins 2010).

At a national level, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are known for their vulnerability to natural disasters, such as cyclones, earthquakes, and the occasional tsunami (Kelman and Khan 2013). In addition, the unique combination of remoteness and smallness of Pacific Island countries, coupled with a predominance of non-tradable and subsistence production, low rates of formal employment, a dependence on imports of higher value-added goods, and fixed exchange rate regimes, suggests that they are also highly vulnerable to economic shocks (Bertram 1999; Easterley and Kraay 2000; Gibson and Nero 2008; Jayasuriya and Suri 2012). It is not surprising, therefore, that Solomon Islands and Vanuatu rank relatively low by international standards, according to a number of development indicators. For example, the average GDP per capita (2005 USD) for Solomon Islands and Vanuatu from 2004 to 2014 is \$986 and \$2,047, respectively. Similarly, their ranking in the Human Development Index places Solomon Islands and Vanuatu at 156 and 134 (out of 188), respectively (United Nations Development Program 2015).

The unique geographic and economic characteristics of PICs such as Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, underscore a key point of difference with other developing countries in how global macroeconomic shocks were likely to have affected women and men. The relative lack of a manufacturing base and the low levels of formal sector employment meant that women were not likely to have been directly exposed to the adverse labor market effects of the GFC/GEC. Further, the food and fuel price shocks that preceded the GFC/GEC were considered to be generally experienced universally in developing countries, rather than exhibiting significant differences between women and men. Therefore, the shocks were unlikely to have been gendered, *per se*.

However, similar to other developing country settings, households' reactions to the shocks and the effects on women and men were often a function of gender roles, responsibilities, and inequalities. Moreover, according to the World Bank

(2008), increased food and fuel prices tended to make already poor and disenfranchised households poorer, while exacerbating intrahousehold inequalities.

Across PICs, gender inequality is fueled by a veritable laundry list of factors, including, the dominance of patriarchy, women's lack of access to decision making, a sexual division of labor that delegates unpaid household responsibilities mainly to women, violence against women, and weak formal institutions (Holmes and Slater 2012). Working women in the Pacific also have multiple roles in sustaining the household and face greater burdens on their time relative to men (Waring and Sumeo 2010). During both idiosyncratic and covariate shocks, women often act as "shock absorbers" by increasing their workload, causing time poverty and health issues (Mendoza 2009; Parks, Abbott, and Wilkinson 2009; Horn 2011). Therefore, policies that can address issues related to women's resilience during times of economic shocks, in particular through increased agency and economic empowerment, merit special consideration.

### **Data and Methodology**

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative empirical data. Such an approach has been shown to be valuable in empirical economic analyses as a way to mutually validate results (Blin and Siegmann 2006). Fieldwork was undertaken in two separate tranches: the initial research undertaken in 2011 shortly after the effects of the shocks in question had been felt by households; and a follow-up two years later. Local teams of women and men within each country were recruited to work with researchers to collect quantitative and qualitative data on households.

In discussions with key research stakeholders during initial scoping visits to each country in late 2010, a broad set of criteria were adopted for the selection of the sampling units. It was decided that six geographically distinct communities would be chosen in each country to provide the research with a sufficiently rich data set on the different ways that households, and individuals within households, were vulnerable and resilient to the effects of global macroeconomic shocks. It was intended that the aggregate distribution of communities be not too dissimilar to census data in terms of the distribution of urban and rural households. Therefore, it was decided to target four rural and two urban communities in each country.

An additional imperative was that the six locations chosen in each respective country should be broadly comparable so as to facilitate cross-country comparisons. Therefore, individual communities were selected according to a number of conditions. For rural areas, these included at least one geographically remote location in each country; regions that were renowned for growing cash crops; and regions that had known links to the programming activities of Oxfam Australia—a key stakeholder in the research. For urban areas, the intention was

to survey communities in the respective capital cities and the second largest city in each country. A strong focus of the research in urban areas was on households in squatter settlements. These communities were known for their low levels of well-being, which provided insight for research into household vulnerability and the implications for social protection policy. Moreover, squatter settlements are often overlooked in nationwide surveys because of their often informal habitation. In addition, to capture the breadth of experiences in towns, we visited two squatter settlements in each of the four urban communities (see Table 1). The aim of this exercise was to test whether different communities characterized by varied proximity to main urban markets and services, such as schools and hospitals, differ in terms of their various responses to shocks.

#### *Research Tools—Household Survey*

Overall, 955 household surveys were conducted in the first tranche of fieldwork in early 2011. Surveys were split broadly evenly between the twelve sample locations.

Because households' vulnerability to an economic shock is, fundamentally, a function of the shock itself as well as the ability to cope with its effects (Heitzmann, Canagarajah, and Siegel 2002), the survey captured self-reported information on shock experience as well as the various ways that households coped with shocks.<sup>1</sup> The survey also gathered detailed information on each household and its occupants, including demographic makeup, migratory behavior, productive assets, income and expenditure, social assets, water and sanitation, and respondents' perceptions of their own well-being. In addition, the survey captured information on key local considerations, including land tenure, use of food gardens, contributions at custom ceremonies, tithes to the church, and the extent of support provided to and received from the broad social network (including the informal social protection mechanism in Melanesia, known as the *wantok* system). The survey also included a number of questions about whether women or men bore primary responsibility for various types of work and had access to particular household resources.

Importantly, the sampling method was specifically designed to identify the range of experiences of both women and men. First, in a departure from many empirical analyses of households' well-being, the survey was not focused on the characteristics of the household head but rather on "the people living in this house". This meant that any adult (female or male) could participate in the survey. The difficulty with household head surveys is that they provide little insight into intrahousehold dynamics. Furthermore, a focus on the household head tends to treat that person's perspective as reflecting that of the entire household (see Monk and Hansen 1982). The emphasis on those living in the house was also practical, because it was revealed during the pilot phase that nominated

TABLE 1. Communities Surveyed and Their Characteristics.

Region	Vanuatu	Solomon Islands	Characteristics
Urban	Port Vila split between: Ohlen Blacksands	Honiara split between: Burns Creek White River	Squatter settlements in the capital city
	Luganville (Santo Is.) split between: Sarakata Pepsi	Auki (Malaita Is.) split between: Lililisia Ambu	Squatter settlements in the second largest city
	Baravet (Pentecost Is.)	Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Limited (GPOL) Villages (Guadalcanal Is.)	Rural communities heavily involved in commercial agriculture
Rural	Hog Harbour (Santo Is.)	Malu'u (Malaita Is.)	Rural communities separated from the respective second city by a direct road
	Mangalilu (Efate Is.)	Weather Coast (Guadalcanal Is.)	Communities on the same island as the respective capital city with known links to Oxfam Australia.
	Banks Islands (Mota Lava Is.)	Vella Lavella Is. (Western Province)	Remote communities a significant distance from the respective capital cities

Notes: Urban and rural distinctions mirror, to the extent possible, the regional distinctions outlined in the respective national census. They are also a convenient approximation of the respective features of the dualistic economy structure in each country, described above.



“head” of the house in both countries was typically indicated as the oldest male in a family (irrespective of whether that person resided in the house or not).

Second, the survey teams aimed to maintain a gender balance in survey respondents (this was achieved: 51 percent were women and 49 percent were men). Therefore, the data from the surveys can be analyzed and compared between the gender of the reported head of the household and, separately, between respondents of different genders.

#### *Research Tools—Focus Groups*

Fifty-two focus group discussions were also held across the project—approximately four per visited community. These were split evenly between women and men. Each focus group included between eight and twelve people and, although individuals were asked to volunteer their time, an attempt was made to gather a broad cross-section of representation from each community by working with community leaders (both women and men) to select among willing participants.

Each focus group was structured similarly. The rationale of the research and the factors influencing vulnerability and resilience to economic shocks was introduced to the group using a metaphor familiar to the participants: the plight of a coconut tree in a cyclone (see McDonald 2014). Three activities then followed. First, participants were asked to explore a timeline of their own past experiences of “good and difficult times”. These times were listed on pieces of card and arranged chronologically. Second, the groups were asked to focus on the “bad times” and then collectively rank each event from most to least difficult. Discussions then focused on participants’ views on why these events happened, what caused them, who was affected, and what different people did as a result.

An additional objective of the focus groups, and a key output for the research, was to explore participants’ thoughts on ways that they can strengthen their resilience to the effects of similar economic shocks in the future. Accordingly, the third activity centered on the metaphor of picking fruit off a tree to draw out various activities and policy responses that can be enacted. Three levels were used: lowest-hanging fruit represented activities requiring no outside assistance; fruit in the middle of the tree represented activities that require some community/village level support; and fruit on the very top branches of the tree represented policy responses that require significant institutional and policy support. The results from this participatory exercise form the basis of policy recommendations.

To gain an understanding of any sustained and dynamic impacts of the shocks in question, research teams returned to half of the communities—three in each country chosen to retain a broadly similar urban–rural profile as the initial fieldwork—to undertake follow-up research at the end of 2012 and in early 2013. A similar mixed-methods approach was used, comprising 660

household surveys and sixteen focus group discussions. Importantly, this process included resurveying 147 of the original households. The household survey was largely replicated in an attempt to record differences in the economic situation of households. The focus group discussions provided an opportunity to deepen understanding of findings from the initial round of fieldwork. Focus groups were introduced to a fictional family, a married couple with children, who were experiencing and responding to economic and other shocks. Focus groups were invited to comment on the family's situation, allowing them to speak about potentially sensitive topics that may otherwise be difficult to articulate in a focus group setting within a tight-knit community. In a link to the initial low-hanging fruit activity, focus groups in the second tranche of fieldwork were also asked to prioritize a list of development projects that they perceived as most pressing for their communities.

All focus group discussions were held in the most widely used languages in each country—Solomon Islands (Pidgin) and Vanuatu (Bislama)—and then translated and transcribed into English by the focus group facilitators. After translation, the focus groups were analyzed systematically using NVivo software. The timeline and ranking exercises were coded, and a frequency analysis done by gender and geographic location, with the information triangulated across survey data and key informant interviews. Data from the low hanging fruit exercise were left largely as case studies.

## Findings

This section presents the results on shock experiences and responses, adopting the conceptual framework of Elson (2010) in examining the gendered nature of economic shocks in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Specifically, it examines the impacts of shocks across three economic spheres: (1) the financial sphere, which includes all financial institutions and intermediaries as well as government ministries of finance; (2) the productive sphere, in which goods are produced and income is earned in both the formal and informal sectors; and (3) the reproductive sphere, concerned with nonmarket production and social provisioning. This human-development centered conceptual approach, summarized by Fukuda-Parr, Heintz, and Seguino (2013), goes beyond an examination of income measures to looking at broader impacts of shocks on well-being and on unpaid work in families and communities.

### *The Financial Sphere*

Potential transmission mechanisms of food and fuel price hikes and the GFC/GEC in the financial sphere include financial instability and a banking crisis, a

loss of government revenue leading to austerity measures and a fall in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). However, rates of monetization are relatively low in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, whereas the banking systems in each country have very limited exposure to complex financial instruments and the US sub-prime mortgage market. Formal labor markets are very small and FDI is often heavily focused in the capital-intensive extractive industries and construction sectors. In contrast, the narrow domestic production base in each country means there is a dependence on imports for higher value added goods, including processed food and fuel (Jayaraman and Ward, 2006). It is for these reasons that the large price hikes for food and fuel preceding the GFC/GEC are likely to have had a far greater impact on these countries than the global economic downturn.

Table 2 confirms this observation—86 percent of the sample reported that they had experienced either an inflation or labor market shock, with most of these (82 percent of the sample) indicating they had experienced local inflationary effects associated with the sharp rise in international commodity prices. In contrast, a much smaller share of households (16 percent) experienced adverse labor market shocks. This included both an unexpected job loss and a reduction in hours worked or wages paid, which are assumed to be, at least in part, a manifestation of the GFC/GEC in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Overall, urban and rural communities were equally likely to experience a price shock. This high proportion of households exposed to price volatility confirms, in large part, the near-universal penetration of imported foods and fuels across each country. Women respondents were statistically more likely to report experiencing a price shock than men (87 percent vs. 77 percent). This may be a reflection that purchasing goods for the household is usually within the domain of women in these countries.

Table 3 limits the sample to those households that experienced either an inflation or a labor market shock and provides the most common household coping responses. It also disaggregates the data by the sex of the respondent. Using environmental resources was the most common response, with the vast majority of households sourcing more food from their garden as well as more marine resources from the reef/sea. It was also common for households to reduce and alter their expenditure patterns as well as increase their labor supply. These different responses are discussed in greater detail in the sections below together with differences in these coping mechanisms between men and women.

In the financial sphere, focus group participants identified a number of policy recommendations. To effectively respond to price hikes, households articulated a strong desire to improve their financial competence and access to financial services. Financial literacy is important to enhancing individuals' abilities to budget, manage cash flow, and increase the scale of their activities. Both female

TABLE 2. Global Macroeconomic Shock Experiences of Households in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (Percentage of Sample in Parentheses), by Gender.

Shock Type	Description	Total (n = 955)	Male (n = 467)	Female (n = 488)
Inflation	Respondent reported that purchasing food and/or fuel had become “harder” or “a lot harder”.	784 (82.1%)	360 (77.1%)	424 (86.9%)
Labor market	Respondent noted that household experienced reduced employment (job loss or reduced hours) or wages were cut.	149 (15.6%)	76 (16.3%)	73 (15.0%)

Note: Price shocks are determined using a five-point Lickert scale in which households nominated whether purchasing food and/or fuel had become easier or harder in the two years preceding the survey, with the midpoint representing no change. If the household nominated either the fourth or fifth item on the scale (i.e., that purchasing food/fuel had become “harder” or “a lot harder” over the relevant timeframe), then that was considered evidence of an inflation shock.

TABLE 3. Most Common Household Coping Responses to Global Macroeconomic Shocks in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (Percentage of Households That Experienced a Global Macroeconomic Shock).

Coping Response	Total (n = 816)	Female Respondent (n = 441)	Male Respondent (n = 375)	Female : Male Respondent Ratio
Use environmental resources	83.9	83.9	84.0	1.00
Including: Use garden <sup>a</sup>	94.5	95.1	88.9	1.07
Reduce spending on nonessential items	77.5	71.9	84.0	0.86
Increase labor supply	73.8	66.2	82.7	0.80
Use traditional support systems <sup>b</sup>	34.7	37.4	31.5	1.19
Switch to cheaper meals or meals of lower quality	73.7	71.7	76.0	0.94
Jettison traditional support <sup>b</sup>	35.8	28.3	44.5	0.64
Reduce spending on utilities	65.9	58.3	74.9	0.78
Reduce spending on health	50.1	42.0	59.7	0.70
Reduce spending on demerit goods <sup>c</sup>	40.8	33.3	49.6	0.67
Reduce spending on education	33.2	29.5	37.6	0.78
Reduce food intake	26.6	28.1	24.8	1.13
Draw down on savings	11.2	11.6	10.7	1.08
Sold livestock	13.4	14.5	12.0	1.21
Migrate to find more work	15.8	16.3	15.2	1.07
Borrow money	2.8	2.5	3.2	0.78

Notes: Global macroeconomic shocks include an inflation shock and a labor market shock. Coping responses are not mutually exclusive. <sup>a</sup>Use garden is calculated as a proportion of those that used the environment. <sup>b</sup>Traditional support systems refer to family, friends, neighbors, and/or the church. <sup>c</sup>Demerit goods refer to consumer products that are generally perceived as bad for one's health or well-being, such as alcohol, cigarettes, betel nut, and kava.

and male focus group participants stated the need for assistance (from government or nongovernment organizations) such that they can learn to better budget and save and, therefore, leverage loans to invest in income-generating activities. The limited reach of financial services into rural areas, in particular, means that financial literacy is also a skill set sorely lacking in rural areas—a fact that was repeatedly identified by focus group participants. Women, in particular, commented on how increased access to financial services and a better understanding of budgeting practices would make them “happy” because it would help deter immediate spending and potentially increase savings. That women’s focus groups related their need for financial literacy as a response to rising food prices and school fees is perhaps indicative of their responsibilities in managing expenditure in these areas.

### *The Productive Sphere*

There is a sharp contrast in livelihoods in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu relative to many other developing countries. A relatively small share of households rely on wages and salaries for their income, whereas the majority depend on smallholder agriculture—a mixture of cash crops and subsistence farming (Government of Vanuatu 2012; Government of Solomon Islands 2015). The “dualistic economy” in Vanuatu has been observed as largely determined along urban–rural lines, with income generated through the formal economy in mostly urban areas and the informal economy in rural areas (McGregor, Watas, and Tora 2009). Furthermore, numerous studies have shown that informal markets are also prevalent in urban centers, as households occasionally sell surplus crops and marine resources to meet their financial needs (Cox et al. 2007; Gibson and Nero 2008). As a result, while the GFC/GEC led to a fall in employment in some sectors, a substantial share of the population in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were cushioned from these impacts. A common response to shocks was for women (80 percent) to peddle food, kava (in Vanuatu) and betel nut (in Solomon Islands) in local markets for extra income. Only 47 percent of men responded in this way.

Nevertheless, societies where a majority of the population depends on informal employment can often find it more difficult to generate additional income following economic shocks. Thus, for example, following increments in the prices of food and fuel, Solomon Islanders and ni-Vanuatu in our sample indicated that they coped with the effects of shocks by adjusting expenditure patterns, suggesting that, whereas they did look toward the labor market for new opportunities, this did not reveal itself to be an effective coping mechanism. In fact, 74 percent of respondents said they increased labor supply, looking for new work opportunities, but few were actually able to find new work. Further,

around three-quarters of households coped with shocks by consuming cheaper, as well as lower quality, food. The shift to cheaper food is consistent with both the observed increased use of food gardens and international evidence that households attempted to preserve their caloric intake during the 2008 spike in food prices by downgrading the quality of their food (Skoufias, Tiwari, and Zaman 2012; Gibson and Kim 2013). These responses did not vary greatly by the gender of the respondent.

Household-level responses to shocks as summarized by the quantitative analysis do not reveal significant divergence in behavior between men and women. However, our qualitative data indicates that in adopting different coping strategies, women within households faced added difficulties. In essence, both women and men were pressed to generate income; however, women also felt pressured to adjust their individual spending and consumption behavior as well as maintain responsibility for housework and care work within their households. Further, participants in women's focus groups commented that it was common for women to sacrifice their food intake to ensure that other members of the household had sufficient food to eat (Donahue, Eccles, and Miller-Dawkins 2014). This is consistent with empirical evidence from other developing countries that women consume less when food is scarce and when the marginal value of food is high (Behrman and Deolalikar 1990; Behrman 1997). Compounding these responses, focus groups revealed that women also faced issues related to domestic violence, a lack of security, and increased stress (Donahue, Eccles, and Miller-Dawkins 2014).

Across the sample, both female and male focus group respondents viewed the potential establishment, and improvement, of local markets as a straightforward way to improve their resilience to shocks. In particular, policymakers should consider investing in the number of quality marketplaces. Fostering the development of markets by increasing their number and locating them closer to population centers would have multiple benefits. It would provide women and men with additional opportunities for informal peddling and income generation, and allow people to take home more income by reducing the costs of transport. This is particularly important given that women identified that they sought to reduce household costs by traveling less following a shock (Donahue, Eccles, and Miller-Dawkins 2014).

Focus groups discussed ways to overcome a number of the challenges of generating income within the informal economy. Across the communities, male and female focus group participants identified that additional agricultural assistance (largely in the form of tools, fertilizer and better planting techniques) would have positive impacts on their lives by providing greater food security as well as increasing households' volume of saleable goods. Participants in urban areas also viewed agricultural productivity as a potential way to mitigate some of the

“pull” factors enticing the youth to migrate to urban areas. A male participant in Honiara suggested that “agricultural tools to [better] cultivate . . . gardens . . . might convince young people to stay back in their [rural] communities.” In both urban and rural communities, there was a stated desire to expand and diversify the range of produce that households could produce so as to strengthen their resilience to the effects of shocks. This was articulated by a woman on the remote Weather Coast who said that “because in communities we are not well educated, I [would] ask [policymakers] to do some training on how to plant vegetables so that I know the techniques to grow more vegetables.”

### *The Reproductive Sphere*

Elson (2010) suggests that the transmission of the crisis in the reproductive sphere in developing countries is likely to be through a fall in the value of remittances and the return home of migrants. Again Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were not significantly affected through this mechanism because of their limited diasporas and limited access to other countries’ labor markets.

Other mechanisms of economic shocks relate to a tightening household budget leading to malnourishment, children dropping out of school, and mental health and depression leading to drug and alcohol abuse among men and a rise in domestic violence (Marcus and Gavrilovic, 2010). In the aftermath of the price shocks, households reduced their consumption of a range of goods. One-third of households, for example, reduced their expenditure on education (mainly via switching children to a cheaper school). However, reassuringly, girls were no more likely than boys to be pulled out of educational activities. Similarly, about half of households reduced their spending on health (mainly medicines). Moreover, and contrary to a priori expectations, approximately 41 percent of households decreased their spending on demerit goods, such as alcohol, cigarettes, betel nut, and kava.

Communities in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu enjoy additional coping mechanisms within the reproductive sphere because of strong ties to the traditional economic system. The informal social protection mechanism in Melanesia, sometimes referred to as the wantok system, is a key characteristic of the region with antecedents stretching back millennia (Oliver 1967). The system provides reciprocal flow of numerous goods (including cash) and services and includes gift giving on special feast days and cultural norms of social obligation.<sup>2</sup> Reliance on these informal mechanisms is a common feature in developing countries where formal insurance markets are missing and public safety nets are unavailable (Fafchamps and Lund 2003; Dimova and Gbakou 2013). Table 3 shows that slightly more than one-third of households indicated that they increased their reliance on traditional support systems, in particular



drawing on family and friends/neighbors. At the same time, however, it appears that traditional economic systems are also coming under strain from economic shocks. It was reported by 36 percent of households that they had jettisoned a cultural obligation as too onerous because of financial pressures. For example, it has become difficult to care for and financially support extended family members, especially as such support increasingly requires cash.

A further element of importance to the reproductive sphere is how employment programs instituted to alleviate poverty interact with family obligations. Focus groups focused on the useful role of overseas labor migration schemes in supporting incomes. However, concerns were raised about the adverse effects that these had on family cohesion the unintended consequences for those family members left behind. There were also discussions of increased financial stress and work requirements on women if funds are not sent home. To cope with the negative impacts, focus groups suggested program design improvements including that money be sent home regularly, communication among family members be maintained, or only single people participate. A woman from Hog Harbor, Vanuatu, articulated:

I think the husband's decision [to participate in a seasonal worker program] will affect his family because, if he goes, then the mother will have to work extra hard to look after the house and the children and make products to earn money for their daily needs, their school fees. But if the husband sends money to his family fortnightly or monthly then the wife will not struggle a lot to earn money for their household needs.

Underlying the concerns expressed by the focus groups is a concern about access to and control over income earned in migrant programs. If women are better able to participate in these programs, they may have more control over how the money is used. This will increase women's financial agency.

## Discussion

This section draws on the empirical findings to suggest the implications for policymakers.

### *Financial Inclusion*

Financial literacy training for women has benefits for both the individual participant and their household. Approximately 70 percent of Pacific Island peoples are without regular access to financial services, and women's absence from

formal banking is recognized as a global issue (Sibley 2010). Findings from rural Fiji emphasize the importance of women's financial inclusion and providing training in financial literacy for women. Fijian women were reported to be mostly responsible for managing household finances and expenditure, including keeping records and budgeting, whereas a minority of men were uncertain of how their households coped with their financial commitments (Sibley 2010). On account of women's prominent role in managing household finances, their abilities in financial management impact the entire household (McCaffrey 2010). In addition, women more often than men put financial planning measures in place after participation in financial literacy training (McCaffrey 2010).

#### *Better and Safer Informal Markets*

Because women are more heavily represented than men in the informal economy, investment in marketplaces is a targeted investment in increasing women's income and a way to address structural gendered inequities. Put another way, it is a pro-poor strategy that makes improvements in the productive sphere in a way that complements, rather than contradicts, the existing sexual division of labor in the reproductive sphere. Moreover, equally important for women's well-being is investment in the quality of marketplace facilities. Recognizing the role of women as caregivers in the home and community, marketplaces should be equipped with facilities that allow women to continue to care for their children in a safe environment. Pooled childcare in a safe place within the marketplace will ensure that women also need not choose between their productive and reproductive responsibilities. In addition, markets are not always safe for women. A U.N. Women survey of Papua New Guinea markets found that 55 percent of women and girls interviewed have experienced violence at the markets, including rape, gang rape, and verbal abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, AusAID 2013). The provision of sanitation facilities, lighting, and security will increase women's safety at markets—in particular, because women sometimes travel from outer islands and sleep in marketplaces.

#### *Lifting Agricultural Production*

A policy focus on increasing agricultural production would have clear benefits for women. This research confirms the findings of other studies that women play a central role in the food economy (Jolly 1994). This includes the maintenance of gardens, harvesting crops and selling surplus produce. In the context of strengthening resilience, increased agricultural production can lead to increased food security as well as increased income generating opportunities for women and their families.

Therefore, policies and programs that raise agricultural productivity of households within Melanesian communities should be central to the design of social protection programs. Improving cropping techniques and better understanding the science of farming locally can also help ensure against the risks posed by declining soil fertility. This is likely to be relatively more important in urban areas where space for gardening is more limited. Indeed, women in the squatter settlement of White River in Honiara suggested that “in Solomon Islands we do gardening a lot but then the soil can get less fertile with less produce so [people] might want to ask for techniques to get soil fertile.”

#### *More Family-Friendly Labor Migration Schemes*

Pacific Island workers have been targeted for participation in the Recognized Seasonal Employer (RSE) program with the New Zealand Government. The RSE program allows for the temporary entry of mainly low-skilled Pacific Islander workers to the horticulture and viticulture industries in New Zealand (International Labor Organization 2014). Participants from Vanuatu are usually married men with children and between their late twenties and early forties in age (McKenzie, Garcia Martinez, and Winters 2008). Although women have participated, their participation has been inhibited by community decision making that is based on traditional gender roles (Bowman, Cutura, Ellis, and Manuel 2009). The final evaluation report of the RSE program found that some participants used earnings to pay school fees, support family members, purchase equipment, vehicles, and land, build homes, and invest in income-generating activities among other uses (Evaluate Research 2010).

Similarly, Australia operates the Seasonal Worker Programme, which commenced on July 1, 2012. It is a Pacific-focused program, which provides eligible citizens from certain countries with an opportunity to undertake low and unskilled seasonal work in Australia. From July 1, 2015, the annual cap on the number of workers participating in the Seasonal Worker Programme was removed such that employers could more easily access seasonal labor when they are unable to source labor locally for particular sectors. Removing the annual cap on program places means that the number of seasonal workers who can enter Australia is determined through employers' unmet need for labor as demonstrated through labor market testing. A formal and independent evaluation of this program has not been undertaken. However, the present study found evidence from focus groups that details that such programs provide households with cash injections, which result in increased savings and a greater ability to invest in income generating activities or items for the household.

In line with the results of this study, research has found the negative impact on families and communities left behind in terms of foregone labor income and

food production for the period duration while prime working age men were unavailable (Rohorua, Gibson, McKenzie, and Garcia Martinez 2009). Such effects can be compounded when workers do not return to their villages. After participation in the RSE program, some ni-Vanuatu workers stayed in Port Vila instead of returning home (Evaluate Research 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are geographically, socially, and economically akin to PICs. Yet, they are uniquely renowned in the region for their very high vulnerability to shocks. Using unique data, specifically tailored to understand how international price and demand shocks affected Melanesian households, we find that there is strong evidence that the brunt of the adjustment to these shocks was borne by women. This result is consistent with international evidence.

The acute country-level vulnerability, coupled with the institutional constraints women often face in attempting to manage risk, mean that a specific focus on the gendered impacts of shocks is critical to effective social protection policymaking. Even more important is that women's own voices guide this process. Without gender-disaggregation and a focus on gender norms, policy risks are, at best, incomplete and, at worst, harmful to women. Across the globe, women's economic empowerment is hindered by a combination of poverty, entrenched patriarchy, unequal access to education and participation in decision making, and balancing paid and unpaid work, including household maintenance, water provision, food provision, and care work. The expectations on women to maintain these responsibilities, without assistance or formal social protection, contribute to women's time-poverty and limits income-generating opportunities.

The findings of this study point toward a number of forms of social protection that could be improved in these countries. Social protection mechanisms require interventions that enable both income generation as well as access to savings at the community level. These policies must be practical and achievable and are adapted to existing institutional structures. For example, because of the limited formal employment opportunities available in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, peddling agricultural goods at the market is a reliable source of income that can double as a safety net in times of crisis. Given traditional Melanesian social structures, women are more likely to sell products at these markets, and access to transport and infrastructure that facilitates this is important. However, increased access to markets will only translate to increased resilience against shocks if households have access to financial services and know how to use them. Financial literacy programs can, therefore, go a long way in building resilience.

Although improving income earning opportunities and financial services can assist households in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in ameliorating the

effects of future shocks, formal social protection schemes are required given the innate vulnerability of these countries. Given the strength and prominence of informal social protection mechanisms, there is some anecdotal resistance to implementing formal social protection schemes in these countries. However, there are a number of strong cases for formal social protection. First, traditional economic systems cannot comprehensively ensure households against shocks. Second, even where households do benefit from traditional social support, there is evidence that it is weakening at the margins, both in urban and rural areas, with increasing urbanization and monetization (Feeny et al. 2013; McDonald, Naidu, and Mohanty 2014). Third, traditional forms of social support tend to be less effective during covariate shocks that affect entire communities or countries (Dercon 2006).

To protect women and men from future shocks, policymakers will need to experiment and pilot different types of social protection schemes. This needs to be based on empirical evidence. The unique vulnerabilities and structural disadvantages faced by women means that gender-disaggregated data and participatory analyses that incorporate women's voices are critical. This paper makes a contribution to building this body of evidence that we can hope will inform better, more complete, social protection policymaking in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, as well as across PICs more broadly.

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### NOTES

1. Self-reported experiences of shocks are captured because retrospective surveys are unable to observe the actual experience of a shock. For example, we cannot directly observe by how much income may have decreased after a shock, whereas respondents may vaguely remember that income decreased but not by how much. As a result, retrospective surveys usually ask respondents to note whether income decreased rather than by how much.

2. Gift giving refers to the traditional Melanesian practice of gift exchange or *Kula*. *Kula* is an opportunity for households to display their wealth, while simultaneously honoring the recipient who could often enjoy a more prominent social status in the community (Maus 1990; Carrier 1992).

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