

GENDER AND FREE TRADE IN THE PACIFIC : CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

Nicole George, Roshni Sami, Virisila Buadromo and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement

On many occasions in the past 12 months Australian Government representatives have confidently asserted the benefits of increased regional free trade in the Pacific. In the face of concerns raised by Pacific leaders about the current series of PACER-Plus negotiations, Australian representatives have professed some sympathy but encouraged regional acquiescence. Their confidence in the proposed agreement is underpinned by the view that a more liberal trade environment in the region will create increased levels of wealth, along with a more integrated regional economic environment. It is assumed that this will, in turn, usher in a new era of Pacific-wide stability and security (Anderson 2009, Crean, 2009).

We contend that deeper complexities underlie these questions. The supposed link between Pacific free trade and enhanced regional security and economic and political stability is difficult to sustain when serious consideration is given to the gendered impacts of trade liberalization. In this submission, we therefore call attention to these issues. Contrary to current practice, we ask that greater attention be paid to the negative, gendered consequences of Pacific trade liberalization. We also contend that greater representation should be given to Pacific women in the current round of PACER-Plus negotiations.

PACER-PLUS AND THE RISK TO WOMEN.

1. Reductions in Government Revenue,

Trade liberalization in the Pacific will lead to an immediate reduction in Pacific government revenues as reliance upon income derived from trade tariffs is reduced (Soni et al. 2007). This in turn will lead to a new round of public sector rationalisation measures akin to the Pacific experience of structural adjustment set in motion in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet the hard lessons learnt from this historical period should not be forgotten. As in many developing countries, Pacific populations were, at this time, forced to fall back on their own resources as governments retreated from the private sector. For Pacific women this meant another addition to their already heavy labour burden, for they now assumed added responsibility for the tasks and costs associated with care-giving to the aged and infirm. We therefore contend that PACERPlus has the potential to increase domestic pressure within families and place an additional labour and economic burden upon women (Cağatay 2001, Slatter 1994, Steans 2003). This is hardly conducive to the empowerment of Pacific women, and threatens to undermine the success of programs established by the Australian government agencies such as AusAID which aim to improve the economic and social standing of women in the region.

2. The Privatisation of Public services

Opening up trade negotiations to include the services sector would require Australia and NZ to also access the Pacific services market, in reciprocity, making the services sector in Pacific economies and Pacific communities vulnerable to exploitative competition. Many of the services are now provided by the public sector and linked to the protection of fundamental human rights, such as access to healthcare (including sexual and reproductive healthcare), access to clean water, and education. The marketisation of these services will compromise Pacific states' ability to uphold and advance such human rights, especially given the high proportion of subsistence and semi-subsistence households, as well as low income households below or near the poverty line. In these situations extra monetary expenses would considerably impact upon women's quality of life and increase their economic vulnerability.

3. Women's Market Participation

It is often assumed that trade liberalization will improve the economic standing of women. Women's access to labour markets is deemed to improve as a result of local increases in export-oriented production. Again, experience from the Pacific and other parts of the developing world indicate the need for a more cautious assessment of this situation. The history of the garment-constriction industry established in Fiji's Export Processing Zones (EPZ) in the 1980s and 1990s suggests that the global competitiveness of these types of enterprises relies heavily upon women providing a source of low-skilled, unregulated and poorly remunerated labour. The working conditions of the women working in this "growth industry" were highly exploitative and poorly policed by a government which although eager to "liberalise" to encourage foreign investment remained highly resistant to local concerns raised about the situation of women workers. (Harrington 2000, 2004, Emberson-Bain, Leckie 2000).

It is also assumed that women agricultural producers will have greater access to markets as a result of a more liberalized trade environment. We argue that this claim should also be greeted with some scepticism. On the one hand evidence from many developing countries suggests that women frequently lack access to the transport infrastructure, and technologies that enable them to take advantage of broader market opportunities and achieve a fair price for their produce. These structural constraints limit their entrepreneurial capacities of women in significant ways but are often overlooked by development policy makers aiming to promote women's empowerment through increased market participation. On the other hand, the crucial role women play in ensuring food security in the region may be undermined if the globalised demand for cash crops dictates trends in agricultural production rather than the traditional production of staple food crops.

We therefore contend that greater attention needs to be paid to the level of women's market participation within the PACER-Plus trade framework, in order to avoid a situation where women's contributions are exploitative, marginalized or geared towards production trends that undermine local food security.

4. Labour Mobility

A key Pacific objective in PACER-Plus negotiations is to secure labour mobility access for seasonal work schemes. This is seen to remedy the problem of surplus semi- and unskilled labour in the Pacific. However the existing proposals for such work schemes are based on host country needs, and provide for only a small number of jobs, are subject to specific wage deductions, and have been criticized as exploitative (Garrett, 2009). Labour mobility is currently wide spread in teaching, nursing, and general care work, and Fiji is an especially significant source –country for this type of regional migration.

Furthermore, for the scheme to benefit communities it would have to be managed in a sustainable way. Policy for positive development labour mobility should include management of the repatriation of funds, minimisation of the expense of repatriating funds, preparatory training and post rehabilitative counselling, access to worker support schemes while overseas, and source-country family support where workers are absent. The potentially negative consequences of a badly managed scheme include: low remuneration, low skilled work experience thus yielding little benefit to Pacific economies on return, trauma from being separated from family with negative health impacts such as substance abuse, as well as detrimental impact on the social fabric of home communities such as vacuum in social

obligations in the community, unfulfilled parenting responsibilities, as well as risk of permanent emigration and the loss of workers from the Pacific.

5. Women, poverty and social destabilisation

Much of the evidence used to promote free trade in the Pacific ignores the socio-economic realities of the Pacific, and particularly the current, serious levels of economic vulnerability being experienced across the region. Assessments of economic growth in PNG provide an interesting example of this trend. Economic growth in PNG, running at roughly 5% annually and achieved largely on the back of a booming but now more volatile resources sector, is viewed as an economic success story which supports the arguments of the pro-free trade lobby in the region. Yet such arguments ignore the fact that that small pockets of rising wealth may certainly exist in PNG, but as in many other parts of the Pacific, they do so alongside widespread poverty. These arguments also ignore the socially destabilizing impacts of resource extraction industries in the region and their potential to instigate serious conflict around questions of land control, environmental degradation and local community remuneration. The devastating impact of the conflict in Bougainville and the heavy toll borne by Bougainvillean women both during and in the aftermath of this protracted war, are a powerful reminder that the costs of globalising Pacific economies via environmental resource extraction can be far heavier to the local population than they first appear (Hakena, Ninnes and Jenkins 2006, Sirivi and Havini 2004).

Male enclave work within resource extraction industries such as logging, mining and fisheries also has a profound impact on communities, including consequences such as the spread of HIV and STIs, the increase in sex work and transactional sex, the increase in substance abuse amongst enclave workers, and the socially destabilising impacts of long absences from home communities including domestic violence, weakening of the social fabric of a community, and increases in work burdens for women left back in the home community. Furthermore, women workers, such as those working in tuna canning industry, are also vulnerable to labour rights abuses, low pay and contextual vulnerability to sex work and transactional sex through proximity to such 'cultures' from sea-farers.

In light of this evidence, we contend that greater effort needs to be made to understand the risks associated with "successful" globalised resource extraction industries in the Pacific region such as mining, logging and fishing.

PACIFIC WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PACER-PLUS NEGOTIATIONS.

Despite the fact that many Pacific Island states are now signatories to CEDAW and regional institutions such as the SPC and PIFS have incorporated a gender focus into the policy frameworks, Pacific women's voices appear to have been entirely absent from current PACER-Plus negotiations. The consultative framework needs to address this situation as a matter of urgency. Serious and sustained consideration of the gendered impact of these trade negotiations cannot take place if women are shut of the regional dialogue process. At the same time, the Australian government should urge Pacific Island governments to appoint gender experts to their formal negotiating teams. The responsibility of promoting a gendered perspective of trade liberalization should not simply be left to the domain of women's organisations and civil society groups. While these groups do have a role to play in this process, formal institutional structures need also be put in place to ensure that the gendered impacts of regional free trade in the Pacific are systematically researched and understood. This will greatly improve the chances that the negative gendered impacts of this policy initiative are reduced.

As we have shown, inattention to the gendered impacts of free-trade in the Pacific region poses significant threats not just to the well-being of women but also to Pacific communities generally. If Australia is serious about ‘working together’ with the Pacific on PACER-Plus then it needs to ensure that its efforts to promote liberalized regional trade reflect an understanding of the risks this agenda also poses to the region. Pacific communities have no need for trade policy which will increase economic marginalization and political alienation amongst those already experiencing vulnerability. This will serve the security interests of no-one.

Anderson, M. (2009) *Samoa Observer*, 14 February.

Cağatay, N. (2001) *Trade, Gender and Poverty*, New York: United Nations Development Programme, October.

Crean, S. (2009) cited *Solomon Star*, 3 April.

Emberson-Bain, A. (1992) "Women Poverty and Post-Coup Pressure", in D. Robie (ed), *Tu Galala: Social Change in the Pacific* (Pluto Press ?), pp. 145-162.

Harrington, C. (2004) “ ‘Marriage’ to Capital: the Fallback Positions of Fiji’s Women Garment Workers” *Development in Practice*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 495-507.

-----, (2000) “Fiji’s Women Garment Workers: Negotiating Constraints in Employment and Beyond”, *Labour and Management in Development Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 5, pp. 2-22.

Hakena, H. Nannes, P. and Jenkins, B. eds. (2006) *NGOs and Post-Conflict Recovery: The Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency, Bougainville*, Canberra: ANU E-Press and Asia Pacific Press.

Leckie, J. (2000) Women in post-coup Fiji: negotiating work through old and new realities. In H. Akram-Lodhi (Ed.), *Confronting Fiji Futures* (pp.178-201). Canberra: Asia Pacific Press.

Garrett, J. (2009) *Adjustment to NZ Pacific Seasonal Labour Scheme Damned*, Radio Australia on 9 June 2009, website: <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/pacbeat/stories/200906/s2593471.htm>

Sirivi, J. And Havini, M. (2004) *As Mothers of the Land: The Birth of the Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom*, Canberra: Pandanus Books.

Slatter, C. (1994) “Banking on the Growth Model? The World Bank and Market Policies in the Pacific: in A. Emberson-Bain (ed) *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth: Perspectives of Pacific Development*, Suva: Marama Publications.

Soni, Harries, and Zinner-Toa (2007) *Responding to the Revenue Consequences of TradeReforms in the Forum Island Countries*, Watergall Consulting Limited.

Steans, J. (2003) “Globalisation and Gendered Inequality”, in D. Held and A. McGrew (eds), *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalisation Debate*. Cambridge: Polity.