

In June this year the Australian government announced a significant expansion of its Seasonal Worker Program (SWP). The program now covers the entire agriculture sector in Australia and will extend to include additional accommodation and tourism sectors in specific regions. The number of Pacific seasonal workers that Australian employers can recruit in these industries has been uncapped.

To date, women's participation in the SWP and New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme has been low (Bailey 2014; Chatterier 2015). Increasing women's participation in these schemes is crucial if development gains are to be maximised. In this, the second in a series of In Briefs that consider women's participation in the SWP, we examine what might be done to address the existing gender imbalances.

Gendered Participation

Australia's SWP aims to boost economic development in participating Pacific countries and Timor Leste by providing access to work opportunities in Australia to meet seasonal peak labour shortages. The missed earning opportunities for women under both the SWP and RSE are significant. Pacific labour mobility to Australia provides opportunities for poverty alleviation through the potential to earn substantial incomes for up to seven months. It is claimed that workers remit (send or take home) as much as \$6000 per season (Chatterier 2015). Notwithstanding the benefits gained through indirect participation in these schemes (Bailey 2014), the extent to which women directly benefit from SWP and RSE income is limited by their participation rates.

Of the 9869 Pacific workers in the RSE (7855) and SWP (2014) in 2013–14, just 1138 (11.5%) were women (Chatterier 2015; Immigration New Zealand 2015). When this data is disaggregated by subregion striking differences emerge. For example, in the SWP in 2013–14, women accounted for 38% of workers from Micronesia (Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu), 15% from Melanesia (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu) and only 11% from Polynesia (Samoa, Tonga). Similar subregional differences are evident in Pacific women's labour mobility to New Zealand, with

Micronesia recording the highest rates of women's participation at 40%, followed by Melanesia (16%) and Polynesia (8%) (Immigration New Zealand 2015). It is worth noting that New Zealand's RSE [Strengthening Pacific Partnerships](#) program has worked at improving women's participation in the Micronesian countries.

International migration literature highlights that nearly [half of the world's migrants are women](#). Yet studies examining international seasonal worker programs have observed low female participation (Bailey 2014; Basok 12/11/2007; Bedford 2013; Gibson and McKenzie 2011). Cultural norms and expectations as well as perceived vulnerabilities can discourage engagement. Research from the Philippines (Ball 2013) and elsewhere (UN Women 2013), however, has shown that women typically direct earnings towards education and household needs. While little is currently known about the drivers and constraints on women's participation in the Pacific labour programs and how earnings are used, anecdotal evidence suggests similarities to international findings. The gender report from the World Bank's SWP impact evaluation (currently underway) will help address this knowledge gap (Chatterier 2015), and may shed new light on the cumulative gains to households and communities through indirect participation in these seasonal worker programs. Research from Vanuatu (Bailey 2014) has already shown a multitude of ways that women benefit from Pacific labour mobility.

Removing Gender Blinkers

Despite heightened interest concerning the potential of international remittances to reduce poverty and drive local development, much analysis to date has lacked a gender perspective. Local gender norms and expectations influence participation as do recruitment practices and employer preferences. If Australia, New Zealand and Pacific island countries desire increased participation by women, then a much stronger gender focus is required. In Vanuatu, women can and do influence local recruitment as well as the material remittances sent home and how financial remittances are used (Bailey 2014).

It may well be that the differing subregional participation rates noted above are at least partly

driven by gender norms in sending countries. Certainly Gibson and McKenzie's (2011) work on Australia's Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme suggests this. They write:

The opinions of workers and their families about gender roles in seasonal work are very closely aligned, while they differ between countries. Amongst the workers from Tonga, 95 percent felt that seasonal work in Australia was more suitable for men than for women ... However, all of the i-Kiribati workers, and the respondents from their households ... felt that seasonal work was equally suitable for men and women. (2011:18)

Poor participation rates may also reflect concerns about the safety of women, working in largely male teams in foreign countries; concerns about worker abuse and exploitation; or simply discrimination on the part of sending communities or local program managers. In some Melanesian cultures, for instance, women are prohibited from cutting, felling or climbing trees and, by extension, climbing ladders.¹

Employer demand for workers with particular attributes also contributes to low participation by women. Some horticultural work is better suited to men, and women are prohibited from undertaking specific types of work in some cultures (see above). Nevertheless, there are also many types of horticultural and packing shed work, such as picking berries, tomatoes and herbs, which should not preclude women and where work could be made more readily available to them.

Balancing the Gender Scales

Across the Pacific, women's access to independent income is limited. Improving their participation in Pacific labour mobility schemes represents one way to address this. Weak participation by Pacific women in seasonal labour mobility requires research to understand the barriers in both sending and receiving nations. Recruitment of women from the same communities and for women-only work, such as in packing sheds, may provide safer work environments and be more culturally acceptable to sending communities. Likewise, improving working relationships between Pacific labour-exporting countries and employers, to identify safe, culturally appropriate employment opportunities for Pacific women, should be given priority.

Related to women's participation in labour mobility is the need to understand remittance use within households. Women's direct (as workers) and indirect (as receivers of remittances) participation in labour mobility and its impacts are related to whether they have real control over remittances. These are important dynamics to understand in order to avoid unintended consequences from seasonal labour mobility, such as increased domestic violence due to conflict over remittance use. Australia's expanded labour mobility program has huge development potential. Making sure women are integral to these schemes will be an important element of reaching that potential.

Author Notes

All the authors are staff members of SSGM.

Endnote

1 Nicole Haley, personal communication, 21/8/2015.

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