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## Beyond development impact: gender and care in the Pacific Seasonal Worker Programme

Priya Chattier

### ABSTRACT

Close to 17,320 workers participate in the Seasonal Worker Programme, a temporary migration scheme between Australia and selected island countries in the Pacific. This article looks at the ways in which seasonal migration affects the social lives of migrants from Tonga and Vanuatu, in their households and communities. It explores the various barriers that women face as a result of this scheme, highlighting, in particular, imbalances in the gendered division of labour caused by the absence of males due to migration. It argues that focusing solely on the economic development discourse of seasonal labour programmes is problematic because it fails to take into account the normative dynamics and general context of seasonal workers. Such an approach also fails to take into consideration the rights of migrants to live with their families, and not to have to make choices that are shaped by physical separation from their families and communities. The article concludes with recommendations for policy reform that address the existing gender inequalities of seasonal worker programmes in the Pacific by putting work, care, and the everyday maintenance of the seasonal worker household at the centre of its analysis.

### KEYWORDS

Gender; migration; Seasonal Worker Programme; labour mobility; Tonga; Vanuatu

Ce sont près de 17 320 travailleurs qui prennent part au *Seasonal Worker Programme* (Programme des travailleurs saisonniers), un programme de migration temporaire entre l'Australie et des pays insulaires choisis dans la région du Pacifique. Cet article examine l'incidence qu'ont les migrations saisonnières sur la vie sociale des migrants de Tonga et de Vanuatu, au sein de leurs foyers et de leurs communautés respectifs. Il se penche sur les diverses barrières auxquelles se heurtent les femmes suite au programme, et souligne en particulier les déséquilibres sur le plan de la division du travail fondée sur les sexes causés par l'absence d'hommes en raison des migrations. Il soutient qu'il est problématique de se concentrer seulement sur le discours de développement économique des programmes de travail saisonniers parce qu'on ne prend alors pas en compte la dynamique normative et le contexte général des travailleurs saisonniers. Une approche de ce type ne tient pas non plus compte des droits des migrants à vivre avec leur famille, et à ne pas devoir faire de choix qui influencés par la séparation physique de leur famille et de leur communauté. Cet article se termine par des recommandations de réforme des politiques générales qui cherchent à remédier aux inégalités existantes entre les sexes présentes dans les programmes destinés aux travailleurs saisonniers dans la région Pacifique en plaçant le travail, les soins et l'entretien quotidien du foyer des travailleurs saisonniers au cœur même de son analyse.

Cerca de 17,320 trabajadores participan en el Programa de Trabajadores Temporales, un plan de migración temporal establecido entre Australia y varios países insulares del Pacífico. El presente artículo examina las maneras en que la migración temporal incide en la vida social de migrantes procedentes de Tonga y Vanuatu en términos de sus hogares y sus comunidades. Al respecto, analiza las distintas barreras enfrentadas por las mujeres por causa de este programa, destacando, en particular, los desequilibrios que se generan por motivos de género en la división de trabajo debido a la ausencia de los hombres que migraron. Resulta problemático, sostiene el artículo, el hecho de que los discursos en este ámbito se centren exclusivamente en el desarrollo económico que conllevan los programas de trabajo temporal, pues éstos no consideran las dinámicas normativas y el contexto general de los trabajadores temporales. Por otra parte, el enfoque centrado en lo económico deja de lado el derecho de los migrantes a vivir con su familia y a no tener que tomar decisiones que impliquen la separación física de ésta y de su comunidad. El artículo concluye proporcionando recomendaciones orientadas a reformar políticas públicas en las que se abordan las desigualdades de género existentes en los programas de trabajo temporal en el Pacífico, centrando su análisis en el trabajo, el cuidado y el sostenimiento cotidiano del hogar del trabajador temporal.

## Introduction

In the last decade, both academic and policy-oriented researchers have focused on the impact of seasonal migration on development in both origin and destination countries (Gibson *et al.* 2014; Underhill-Sem and Marsters 2017). A common theme that runs across existing research is the development impact of seasonal workers, and the net gains from remittance incomes to the participating households and communities (Doyle and Sharma 2017).

Seasonal labour mobility programmes provide many small islands and developing states with opportunities for sustainable development and growth. The growth potential in many island countries in the Pacific is often constrained by their small size, geographical isolation, vulnerability to climate shocks, and volatile trade relations.<sup>1</sup> The lack of decent and adequate employment opportunities in the agricultural sector attracts many Pacific Island labourers into seasonal work in Australia and New Zealand, through regulated labour mobility schemes that have been established between the governments of origin and destination countries. In recent years, this has resulted in many island governments promoting seasonal migration programmes as a ‘win-win situation’ (Brickenstein 2015, 107) for employers, workers, sending households, communities, and countries (Bishop 2018), and also as a good development model for the employment of Pacific Island seasonal workers (Gibson and McKenzie 2014).

Temporary seasonal mobility schemes were introduced in the early 2000s, to encourage voluntary migration to meet the labour shortages in the agricultural and horticultural sectors in Australia and New Zealand (Petrou and Connell 2018). Both of the temporary labour mobility schemes – the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) in New Zealand

(2007) and the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) in Australia (2009) – were first introduced through bilateral trade agreements between participating island countries, attracting many agricultural workers to short-term work opportunities in Australia's and New Zealand's agricultural sectors.

For decades, a male-centred view prevailed in the Pacific discourses on migration, often attracting men – who saw themselves as the main breadwinners – to earn money for the household. Increasing numbers of economically motivated young women and men from the Pacific are now joining seasonal labour markets in Australia and New Zealand for income stability, as well as economic benefits. Much existing research emphasises the positive impact of seasonal work on the economic development of Pacific societies.

The feminist economists Diane Elson and Nilufer Cagatay (2000, 1355) have emphasised the 'male-breadwinner bias' of seasonal labour mobility programmes in the Pacific, which tend to prioritise the economic benefits of male seasonal workers. Such biases often fail to acknowledge the gendered dynamics of care and work in Pacific societies, as well as the reliance of Pacific men 'on the unpaid and informal caretaking work of women' (Robinson 2006a, 324), which result in limited opportunities for women to participate in seasonal work. Neither researchers nor policymakers have yet given much attention to the hidden – and gendered – burden of 'ongoing responsibilities for social reproductive/caring work' (Robinson 2006a, 328), which is carried out by those who have been 'left behind' (Torres and Carte 2016, 399) when male members of the household participate in seasonal work.

In this article, I aim to help fill the gaps in understandings of seasonal labour mobility, and bring to the fore the gendered inequalities and injustices of the seasonal labour market. I explore how the gender division of labour within households and communities determines who gets recruited for seasonal work, who leaves, and who stays home, and show how this negatively affects the women who have been left behind. The article is based on a qualitative study, conducted as part of the World Bank's Impact Evaluation assessment of Australia's SWP. The study looked at the social effects of seasonal migration on labour-sending households and communities in Tonga and Vanuatu, as well as the barriers women face in participating in the scheme (Chattier *et al.* 2018). Moving beyond the rather simplistic perspective that only takes into consideration the positive development impact of the scheme, I seek to shed light on the gendered implications of the scheme. Men's absence not only places a greater burden of work on the women who have been left behind, but also confines them to their traditional gender roles – often limiting any opportunity to seek paid employment or wage labour. By employing Fiona Robinson's (2006a, 321) 'feminist political ethic of care' framework, I argue that taking a narrow focus on the economic development discourse of the seasonal labour programmes is problematic. Such an approach – and its failure to take into account the normative dynamics and context of seasonal workers – feeds into policies about migrant work that compromise migrants' labour rights to live with their families and not have their choices shaped by physical separation from members of their households.

The article is organised into five sections. The first section provides context to the SWP and the two main participating countries – Tonga and Vanuatu. The second offers a

feminist perspective on work, care, and everyday maintenance of the seasonal worker household at the centre of its analysis. A feminist approach which focuses on care from a political and ethical point of view encourages us to critique the approaches of many economists and planners. In particular, these approaches tend to mainly prioritise national economic growth, giving little attention to the rights of workers and the need to address inequalities – including gender inequality – in society.

Qualitative evidence from the research is presented to reflect community perceptions on gender norms and the gendered roles of women, and how these attitudes drive the mobility decisions of women and men and their participation in seasonal work. The article also presents findings on how the traditional gendered roles of women and men are beginning to shift as more men participate in seasonal work and, as a result, greater burdens are placed on the women who have been left behind. The conclusion emphasises the need for a rights-based approach to policy changes that not only conceptualises migrants' 'relationships, responsibility and care' (Robinson 2006a, 330), but also addresses the existing gender inequalities inherent in seasonal worker programmes in the Pacific.

### The Seasonal Worker Programme in Australia

Australia's SWP was established in 2012 after the introduction of a pilot scheme in 2008, which was modelled on New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme. Since 2012, the SWP has attracted and employed close to 17,320 Pacific Islanders from countries including Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu (Doyle and Sharma 2018). The SWP not only opened employment opportunities for seasonal workers from these islands, but also contributed to rising income levels through remittance flows and economic development (Bedford *et al.* 2017). Most Pacific Islanders from poorer villages are attracted to the programme because of the wage gap between Australia and the Pacific and, most importantly, the economic motivation to earn a higher wage (Doyle and Sharma 2017).

Seasonal workers from the two largest origin countries, Tonga and Vanuatu, are mostly unemployed, self-employed, or work in the informal sector as unpaid family workers. For workers from the Pacific who are unemployed before departing to Australia, their opportunity cost of participation is often lower than those who are already employed, given the higher net weekly earnings in Australia (AUD\$702) than at home (AUD\$163) (Doyle and Sharma 2017). Hence, seasonal work provides an opportunity for unemployed male Pacific Islanders from poor communities to utilise their productive potential and increase their earning capacity upon their return. The World Bank impact evaluation report (Doyle and Sharma 2017) highlights that remittances and savings through seasonal work not only have a positive effect on poverty, but also contribute to an increase in workers' household consumption (including the construction of houses and dwellings) and local investment. SWP workers, mostly from Tonga and Vanuatu, are able to save and send remittances per season to pay for school fees and the construction of houses, as well as to meet church, village, and/or communal obligations (see Chattier *et al.* 2018).

While the countries participating in the SWP have become more diverse, Tonga and Vanuatu are still the largest participating countries from the Pacific Islands (Howes 2018). In addition, in recent years, the SWP has seen a substantial growth in the number of male workers from the island countries. Female representation, on the other hand, has been low and stagnant across all the participating island countries. Since 2012, the SWP has been dominated by males due to in-country (local) selection processes – with men being better connected to local recruiting agents and having more knowledge about seasonal work, as well as employer demands and preference for male agricultural labourers over females (Doyle and Sharma 2017). Between 2012 and 2017, only 13.7 per cent of females participated in the SWP, compared to 86.3 per cent of males (Chattier *et al.* 2018, 2). This raises crucial questions about what constitutes ‘economic activity’, which has led to only men participating in seasonal work at the expense of ‘female altruism’ (Molyneux 2006, 437) and women’s unpaid family labour.

Over the years, Tonga and Vanuatu have been, by far, the largest participating countries in the SWP with sustained growth (Doyle and Sharma 2017). The Kingdom of Tonga is situated in the north-west of the Pacific Rim. According to the 2011 Census (Tonga Department of Statistics 2011, ix), Tonga has a population of 103,252 people, with a slightly higher percentage of males (50.3 per cent) than females (49.7 per cent). Lack of employment and education opportunities in the outer and rural islands have led many Tongans to move to larger towns and the capital city, as well as overseas, in search of employment opportunities. A significant majority of the population depends on subsistence livelihoods, such as horticulture and fishing, rather than the cash economy. An estimated 22.1 per cent of the population in Tonga live below the national poverty line (Asian Development Bank 2018).

Vanuatu has an estimated population of 270,000 people and is the only Melanesian country in the Pacific to have participated in the seasonal labour programme in large numbers since its start (Petrou and Connell 2018). The majority of the population relies on subsistence agriculture and informal livelihoods in rural areas (Craven 2015). While more males than females are classified as ‘economically active’, a slightly higher percentage of females (49 per cent) than males (41 per cent) are employed as subsistence workers (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2009, 39). Vulnerability to climate shocks, economic constraints, together with rising poverty levels and unemployment rates in urban centres such as Port Vila and Luganville, are now pushing many local men and women into seasonal work opportunities in Australia and New Zealand (Craven 2015). In 2010, almost 12.7 per cent of the population was living below the poverty line (Asian Development Bank 2018).

Against this backdrop, the research on which this article is based considers, from a gendered perspective, the impact of temporary seasonal worker programmes on participating households and communities in Tonga and Vanuatu, with an aim to shed light beyond conventional discourses on migration and development in the Pacific.

## Feminist perspectives on care

A growing body of evidence on labour mobility schemes and their impact on development over the last decade is constructed around the economically motivated notion of the male breadwinner (Underhill-Sem and Marsters 2017). As suggested earlier, gendered questions about migration seem to receive little attention in mainstream development and seasonal migration research in the Pacific. A few studies have looked at the micro-picture, highlighting the impact of seasonal work on household arrangements and relationships affecting participating households and communities. For example, the study by Halahingano Tu'akolo Siufanga Rohorua *et al.* (2009) reveals that, as a result of men being absent from Tongan households, the gendered roles in subsistence production are disrupted, increasing women's burden of work in terms of agricultural. In addition, Maggie Cumming's (2016) recent social impact study of RSE workers in Port Vila looked at the financial strains of men's increasing consumption on family relationships in the islands upon their return.

But a gendered understanding of the impact of seasonal labour migration needs to look at much more than remittances, savings, and income flow. What is missing in much of the research on migration is the focus on the gendered division of labour and responsibilities, and the importance of women's unpaid care work to participating male seasonal workers, their families, communities, and the Pacific economy. While a significant majority of seasonal workers tend to benefit economically from the seasonal labour mobility programmes, their participation in the SWP often 'create gaps in their own families and communities ... [and] the care gap which these migrants leave behind' (Robinson 2006b, 21). As noted by Naila Kabeer (2003, 33–6), women's non-wage role relating to the care and maintenance of the family is often classified as being a 'housewife' and considered a non-economic activity. Thus, there is a need to take into consideration and analyse the unpaid contributions that the women who are left behind are making, the gendered power relations that determine how household responsibilities are assigned and distributed, and the impact of all these factors on women's inequitable access to seasonal work.

Over the decades, feminists have argued the need to challenge the 'false analytical divide between production and reproduction' (Pearson 2004, 618) and bring about policy changes that address the structural inequalities and processes of the global political economy (Robinson 2006b). Researcher Fiona Robinson has argued that a feminist political ethic of care is important. This enables us to analyse the complex 'web of human relationships and the responsibilities' (Robinson 2006b, 8) of seasonal workers when they participate in temporary labour mobility programmes. Rather than focusing solely on the economic benefits of seasonal work, it is important to highlight the contextual realities, obligations, and responsibilities of participating seasonal workers to their families and communities. This article seeks to challenge the patriarchal assumptions of migration and explores the relationship between traditional gendered norms and roles and the unintended consequences of the changing economic roles of men and women.



## Gender relations in Vanuatu

While traditional roles of women and men in the Pacific are changing as a result of more women and girls having improved access to education, health, and employment, gender inequalities continue to persist across the Pacific Islands as a whole. Patriarchal gender roles continue to structure the traditional roles of women and men, including those within the family, in many Pacific societies.<sup>2</sup> Given the rigid gender roles, I argue that seasonal labour mobility not only disrupts the traditional normative framework, but also places a huge burden on those left behind – who are usually women. It is important to note that while the gendered expectations of women and men in the Pacific are socially constructed, participation of women and men in seasonal work is also influenced by cultural norms that both shape temporary migration patterns and challenge patriarchal gender norms in the Pacific.

Vanuatu is still a patriarchal society. Traditional gender norms and customary (*kastom*) practices dictate gender roles and power relations between women and men that permeate across contemporary Vanuatu society, government, and communities. Despite Vanuatu having ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), customary practices and attitudes on gender continue to persist and discriminate against women (Jolly 1996). Patriarchal gender relations continue to polarise the roles of women and men in Vanuatu society, where men are expected to be the economic providers and women are primarily responsible for domestic duties. Religion and Christianity are also important factors in reinforcing and legitimising rigid gender roles and inequalities in contemporary Vanuatu society.

## Gender relations in Tonga

In Tongan society, the *fahu* system – where women's role as sisters is linked to their rank, status, and female privilege within the family and in relation to chiefly entitlements – ensures women's high status (Lee 2017). However, patriarchal gender norms still dominate Tongan society, politics, and the church, and significant gender inequalities still prevail and relegate women and men to their traditional gendered roles. For example, the father or male figure is still considered to be the head of the household, with more authority in household decision-making, and women take greater responsibility for family and community care (PHAMA 2016).

## My research methodology

I conducted my research in 2016 as part of the World Bank's impact evaluation study, combining qualitative and quantitative data-sets across Tonga and Vanuatu to inform my findings on the social impact of seasonal work in the Pacific. In this article, I draw on the qualitative data collected to show the interplay between gender relations at the household and community level, and the changing family relations and gender roles. The data in this study were collected from a range of participatory research methods,



including focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in each of the island groups across Tonga and Vanuatu (Chattier *et al.* 2018). All quotations below come from these sources.<sup>3</sup>

The participants selected for group discussions in Tonga and Vanuatu were separated by gender and age. A total sample of 303 participants across Tonga and Vanuatu informed the qualitative study, with 158 male participants and 145 female participants.<sup>4</sup> I intentionally focused on collecting the everyday experiences of the individuals in order to ‘better grasp the experience of being a migrant or a person left behind’ (Torres and Carte 2016, 404).

## Main findings

### *Gender norms and migration decisions: who leaves and who stays behind?*

Gender norms and ideologies are often important drivers of migration. In particular, the household division of labour dictates gender norms around the productive/reproductive divide between women’s and men’s roles. The focus groups from across all the communities discussed how contemporary gendered norms of what constituted a ‘good wife’ and a ‘good husband’ had changed from the previous generation, and explored how ‘new and changing economic roles of women and men through seasonal work’ (Chattier *et al.* 2018, 12) are bringing about changes to the traditional gender roles. Table 1 provides a glimpse of how perceptions of gender norms have changed with regards to the participants’ expectations of ‘who does what within the household and the community’ in both Tonga and Vanuatu.

In describing the qualities of a ‘good wife’ and a ‘good husband’, the research reflected the tendency for women to take primary responsibility for domestic duties and child care, while men provided for the family. But, at the same time, the evidence suggested that, given the economic pressures to make a living on the islands, the deeply rooted gender expectations are now being redefined by both women and men in Tonga and Vanuatu. Participants in the focus group discussions noted that seasonal work was opening up opportunities for both women and men to earn a living, support the family, and gain respect in the community.

While there is a greater acceptance of seasonal work opportunities that allow both women and men to participate in the SWP, men in Tonga and Vanuatu are now faced with increasing pressure to take up seasonal work in order to assert themselves as better husbands and fathers than those who do not engage in such work. Seasonal work provides men in Tonga and Vanuatu with an advantage to fulfil their gendered role with some flexibility by being ‘absent husbands/fathers’. As one man highlighted in a male focus group in Vanuatu:

One SWP male worker came back with money and other men now see him differently. Other men in the village aspire to be like him. We also want to have money like him. We aspire as well for family and to build a good house like him, buy a truck or start a business.

Similarly, in a male focus group discussion in Tonga, a participant noted:

**Table 1.** Common ideals of a good wife and a good husband in Tonga and Vanuatu.

Good wife		Good husband	
Now	Previous generation	Now	Previous generation
Educated	Hardworking	Educated	Lazy men
She has rights – knows more	Not educated	Hardworking	Men had more
Works hard	Weaves, gardens and	Makes gardens	authority in everything
Earns an income	cooks	Feeds pigs	Respected
Business owner	Respects everyone	Goes fishing	Not educated
Leaders in parliament	Has great values	Collects firewood	Hardworking
Humble	Respects husband	Makes copra	Shares money with
Respects others	Submits to husband	Plants crops	wife
Creative	Looks after husband	Responsible father	Works a lot in the
Never complains	Just listens to men	Takes care of family	gardens
Survives on her own if husband is not	Cooks food for men	Washes clothes	Provides for the family
around	Weaves mat	Cleans house	Spends more time with
Good mother	Never plants taro, only	Cooks food	family
Good exemplar	men do the gardens	Respects wife	Works in the gardens
Faithful wife	Cleans around the house	Honest and loving husband	together
Keeps marriage vows till death	Keeps <i>nakamals</i>	God-fearing husband	Drinks kava
Respects husband	(meeting places) clean	Earns a living	
Attends church	Bakes food on hot stones	<i>Balances work and family life</i>	
Manages home and finance	No fighting with the	<i>Participates in SWP to help</i>	
Contributes to household income	husband	<i>family (Vanuatu)</i>	
Takes care of household chores	Less divorce	<i>Participates in SWP and comes</i>	
Balances family life and work (good		<i>back to the family (Tonga)</i>	
time management and organisation		<i>Joins SWP to improve living</i>	
skills)		<i>standard of family (Tonga)</i>	
<i>Does not participate in the SWP</i>		Faithful father	
<i>(Vanuatu)</i>		Household head	
<i>Participates in SWP – if she is focused</i>		Manages home and family	
<i>(Vanuatu and Tonga)</i>		Shares income with wife	
<i>Participates in SWP to improve family</i>		Respectable person	
<i>well-being (Tonga)</i>		Good role model to others	
Participates in community work		Helps community members	
Goes to the market to sell copra		Helps wife in housework	
Stays home and is busy with household		Does not drink kava	
chores		Improves house	
		Goes to church	

SWP workers are generally hardworking men and they build houses, buy a vehicle and use the money wisely for the improvement of the family when they come back. They usually have a goal to achieve for the family.

On the other hand, women who participated in the SWP or wanted to participate in seasonal work were viewed negatively by both males and females in the focus groups and were regarded as causing damage to family life. A man in a Tonga focus group noted:

In the Tongan traditional way of life, women are always important for home – home is for women and if women go in the SWP, what are duties that men do? That's not proper for women to leave the husband with the family. Traditionally, in Tonga, women stay home and men go out and work and therefore more men should join the programme.

Similarly, in Vanuatu, community perceptions in the focus group discussions often entrenched around why women should not be working and leaving their families. A male participant stated:

Men depend on their wives to look after the children, so they can go [and work]. Here, men don't like to do women's jobs and they depend on women to do the household chores, so they can do the

men's job, like go in the SWP. Also, seasonal work on farms is too heavy for women – it demands heavy tasks.

Women participants in another Vanuatu focus group voiced similar views:

No women should participate in seasonal work because of home duties.

Gender ideology not only shapes family and community decisions about who from the islands should participate in the SWP, but it also drives community perceptions about what is considered culturally appropriate with regards to men's and women's participation in seasonal work. One man in a Tonga focus group said:

Women should not participate [in SWP] because they cannot climb up the steps to pick the fruits; women lose their traditions if they climb up the steps. It is important for women to do only traditional jobs, and seasonal work is only fit for men. Women can only join for light tasks such as packing of fruits and not climbing the ladder to pick fruits. For example, picking tomatoes, fruits and grapes [are] fit for women, but apple [picking] is suitable for men only because it needs the ladder to reach the fruits on top of the trees.

Similar gendered stereotypes of women's and men's work were reiterated by both male and female participants in Vanuatu. Women were seen as less able to withstand hard conditions on the farms by one man in a focus group here:

Women only work in the pack houses but men on the farms because the sun is very hot for women. Only boys from Vanuatu go [to] the farm to pick mangoes in the hot sun.

Restrictive community perceptions on women's and men's gendered roles continue to reinforce traditional gender norms, limiting women's equal participation in the SWP. Thus, in trying to promote the participation of men in seasonal work, women end up preserving and keeping gender norms intact. These negative stereotypes were pervasive across all the communities I consulted in Tonga and Vanuatu. Women's participation in seasonal work was only possible if they were single, had no domestic responsibilities, or were married but had permission from their husbands to participate, and also after shifting their domestic responsibilities to either their husbands or other family members while they were away (Chattier *et al.* 2018).

### Shifting gender roles and the impact on those left behind

As seen in the previous section, the gendered roles of women and men in Tonga and Vanuatu, and particularly the domestic responsibilities of women, are important drivers in determining who participates in seasonal work and who stays behind. This section presents findings on whether or not traditional gendered roles of women and men in Tonga and Vanuatu are changing or shifting as a result of more men participating in the SWP than women. To explore the relationship between household division of labour and the gendered burden of responsibility, participants were asked to identify who was now taking up the additional responsibilities that existed as a result of the SWP worker leaving the household for the duration of six to seven months.

In many multi-generational households, it was noted by participants (mostly in Tonga) that when a male/female SWP worker is away, the burden of additional work is often borne by other relatives and elderly members of the household. For example, participants in Tonga mentioned that when women ‘participate in seasonal work, the burden of the household chores for male relatives and unpaid work often remains the main responsibility of other relatives, mostly women, who stay behind’ (Chattier *et al.* 2018, 40).

Similarly, in Vanuatu, when both husband and wife are away to participate in the SWP, the burden of child care often falls on grandparents and other household members. As noted by an elderly female focus group participant from Efate:

If both husband and wife go in the SWP they have to sort their kids out with someone, either grandparents or other relatives.

As in Tonga, while it was very common for other family members and relatives in Vanuatu to help the wives with all the household chores at home, ultimately these were women’s responsibility to do alone when men were absent. One woman focus group participant said:

Wives who are left behind are involved in all other tasks that the husbands might have been doing before they leave.

This was a common experience across the islands in both Vanuatu and Tonga, and demonstrated the realities of seasonal work and its impact on gender roles.

In contrast, work associated with women was not taken over by men so readily when the women participated in seasonal work. In such cases, male relatives or husbands often relied on other female relatives in the household to help with the household chores. A woman in a Vanuatu focus group stated:

Female family members always help Papa with the kids when the wife participates in the SWP.

The domestic responsibilities of housework and child care are still not necessarily transferable to men who are left behind, even with more women participating in the SWP. This could also explain why households and communities in Tonga and Vanuatu are more likely to send males rather than females to participate in seasonal work.

On the other hand, when men participate in seasonal work, it is often taken for granted that female members left behind will manage on their own. For instance, in a group discussion with females in Tonga, it was noted that:

Wives look after the jobs of men in the home, but before leaving they have to organise with someone to look after the family when he is gone. In terms of the working hours of women, families are always there to help in the home. But when [the] husband is away on [the] SWP, [the] wife has more work to [do]. Some husbands also pay someone to work in the gardens when they are away.

A young male focus group member from Vanuatu described similar domestic arrangements that take place when the husband is away:

The wife may ask a group of men who do casual work to make the new garden in the bush and mow the land. All this is hard work for the wife. So, the men [husbands] make other arrangements

with male friends. For the church-related work, normally the wife takes up the responsibilities of the husband in the church. In fact, men have to complete their share of the church-related activities before they can attend the SWP.

Therefore, women end up not only shouldering a heavier burden of household duties, but also perform the traditional roles and communal commitments of the husband when he is away for SWP work. A young woman from Tonga observed how gender roles are changing as a result of women's increased workloads:

When the husbands leave home, wives are left behind on their own to manage the family and also work on the plantations. We see many women doing the jobs of the men, for example ringing the church bells for several months of the year because the able-bodied men are away.

Thus, a husband's participation in seasonal work implies adjustments to the traditional gendered division of labour within households and a re-allocation of household labour to those left behind. A man in a Vanuatu focus group stated:

Before joining the SWP, men are mostly farmers and gardeners, but when they are away, the women have more hours of work because they now have to clean the kava garden, clear the garden for copra, and take care of children. If the husband is not around then it is too much work for women – looking after kids, preparing food, cutting firewood – and so the traditional ways of doing things are changing.

Some even expressed deep concern towards the changing traditional roles of women, and even children, who now shoulder the traditional responsibilities of men. One woman in a Vanuatu focus group said:

Women now take up the responsibilities of everyone – wife, husband, mother, [and] father, and it is hard life for women when [the] husband is away. Women and kids do all the tasks that men used to do. And now women tend to have long working hours – they have to fetch water, cook, clean, and do the gardening too. But sometimes male relatives help out with the gardening.

These findings are consistent with an earlier study on absent seasonal workers from the Pacific and women's increasing agricultural workload (Rohorua *et al.* 2009). In fact, the workload for women in Tonga and Vanuatu increases significantly with this double shift, having to work on the subsistence farms, manage household budgets, care for children and the elderly, and engage in community and church-related work in order to facilitate men's participation in seasonal work. It is important to note that the preference of male, over female, seasonal workers is likely to have little or no impact on traditional roles of men as the main providers of the household in Tonga and Vanuatu.

As evident in the previous section, strong patriarchal community attitudes continue to discourage women from participating equally in seasonal work and women bear the consequences of men leaving. For example, participants across Tonga and Vanuatu painted a precarious picture of hardship, neglect, and marital stress faced by families left behind. In an in-depth interview with an SWP worker's wife in Vanuatu, she explained:

When my husband was away there was shortage of money because he did not send money on regular basis. So, I had to cook banana and kumara laps laps [typical Vanuatu street food] and

sell [them] on the roadside so that I can buy food for the children. None of my relatives help[ed] me and I did not want to go to my husband's relatives to ask for food.

Another female interviewee from Vanuatu expressed similar concerns:

My husband also never sent money during his season. And when I ask him about the money, he gives excuses about [the] timing of work on the farms, [and the] farm being far away from the town centre and therefore [having] no time to go to the town centre. By the time work finishes, the town centre is closed. By the time he came back he did not bring good money and now we argue about the money all the time.

Similarly, the participants in Tonga highlighted that the negative impact on families left behind is often caused by two types of men: men who go on the SWP and never return, and men who go on the SWP but do not come back with money. A key informant interviewee stated:

Tongan men/boys abuse the opportunity [to bring money home] because they can't save up. Over there they earn lots of money and then waste [it] on drinks and other women.

These examples of the neglect and hardship experienced by families and wives left behind on the islands are not intended to be generalisations or representative of all workers who participate in seasonal work; but neither can these negative effects on families be discounted. The qualitative evidence from Tonga and Vanuatu highlights the fact that women left behind not only pick up the pieces, as far as unpaid work (both productive and reproductive responsibilities) is concerned, but also shoulder the emotional and psychological stress of being neglected or left behind. In order to understand the development impact of seasonal work on Pacific societies and communities, it is crucial to capture such grounded understandings of how seasonal work affects or disproportionately impacts the everyday realities of households and individuals left behind and across the varying contexts.

## Policy recommendations and ways forward

Temporary seasonal work programmes in the Pacific are not gender-neutral. This article highlights the need to take into consideration the gendered impact of 'absent male workers' on families, households, and communities in Tonga and Vanuatu. In employing a feminist political ethics of care approach, I emphasise the need for migration discourses in the Pacific to move beyond the development impact on participating households and communities, and consider the unpaid domestic responsibilities and care work performed by women and family members who are left behind. I argue that unpacking the gendered complexities of seasonal migration can contribute towards a deeper understanding of changing gendered roles of women and men from these communities and societies.

The increasing participation of women and men in the SWP is clearly changing the normative views on women's and men's traditional roles; or is at least bringing about modifications to gender ideologies, with some flexibility around the gendered division of labour within the household. While gender roles may be shifting with more men than women participating in seasonal work, strong patriarchal perceptions and attitudes persist with

women and men reverting to their traditional roles upon their return (Chattier *et al.* 2018). Therefore, the gendered impact of seasonal work cannot be fully understood by merely documenting the increasing number of males and females participating in seasonal work and the economic impact of remittance flows on households and communities with participating members. As more men continue to participate in seasonal work, this does not necessarily bring about changes to traditional gender roles, but rather, leads to the persistence of gender norms. Empirical evidence from this research suggests that women who are left behind often cope with a heavier burden (both emotional and physical) due to unequal participation of women in seasonal work.

While the existing research on seasonal work and development impact in the Pacific may be biased towards the ‘male breadwinner’ model, there is a limited account of ‘ongoing human relations of care’ (Robinson 2006a, 331), which is performed by women and members of the household who have been left behind. As highlighted earlier, women in Tonga and Vanuatu society tend to bear the greatest burden of housework, caring for children and the elderly, and also fulfilling communal obligations of the village and church when the men are away. In fact, the over-reliance on women’s unpaid labour to meet family obligations and responsibilities relating to care also frees up time for many male members of the household in Tonga and Vanuatu to participate in seasonal work and be temporarily away from home. As a result, the women left behind not only carry a heavy burden of domestic responsibilities, but tend to have limited opportunities for productive work outside the household.

Seasonal workers have a right to family and community life while on seasonal employment, with both women and men participating equally in the labour of caring. But the way in which temporary labour mobility schemes are structured and operated result in the family and work life of seasonal workers existing separately from each other: workers live and work in Australia, while families stay behind on the islands. As argued in this article, the seasonal labour mobility programme’s narrow focus on economic growth relating to remittance flows and development fails to consider the daily lives of Pacific Islanders, which are often immersed in inter-dependent family relationships, clan networks, and domestic responsibilities of care. Seasonal workers ‘rights are limited since they retain a narrow focus on work as paid labour, decontextualised from the household, and from the local and global relations of care upon which people’s daily lives are immersed’ (Robinson 2006a, 333).

The feminist political ethics of care approach is a first step towards reconceptualising the nature of temporary labour programmes that recognise the interconnectedness of seasonal work and workers’ care responsibilities, as well as their obligations to family and community in their daily lives. This article illustrates how sexual division of labour tends to overburden women with domestic responsibilities and reproductive tasks (Pearson 2004). Hence the need for policymakers, government, and development organisations to recognise the importance of the productive labour of seasonal workers, as well as the unequal burden of care work undertaken by women who are left behind. The research findings call for a radical policy change in the SWP that balances women’s care work and men’s productive work. There is a need for policymakers, employers, and development practitioners to acknowledge the fact that an equal division of labour of caring is



not possible under current terms and conditions of the SWP in Australia unless workers are allowed to take their families with them.

As suggested by Ruth Pearson (2004, 617), an introduction of a ‘Maria Tax’ would require labour-sending governments to levy a tax on importers of labour that reflect women’s unpaid care work that enables Pacific Islander men to participate in seasonal work. The revenue from this tax would then provide opportunities for Pacific governments to reinvest in the domestic economy that advance women’s economic empowerment and wellbeing through the provision of child-care facilities, by creating opportunities for women in the informal sector, or through education and awareness programmes for seasonal work. The concerns raised in this article highlight the need for policymakers to consider more seriously the gendered impact of seasonal work on participating families and communities from the Pacific, and increase calls for governments to incorporate and lobby for the inclusion of women’s unpaid care work in seasonal labour markets.

## Notes

1. The prospects for economic growth in the Pacific Islands are often constrained by their smallness, isolation, and vulnerability to natural disasters making trade relations extremely volatile with fluctuating Gross Domestic Product (Kautoke-Holani 2017).
2. Social inequalities between women and men in Pacific societies have been well documented in feminist ethnographic discourses of the 1970s and 1980s (Jolly 1994; Jolly and Macintyre 1989; Strathern 1987). The earlier academic research has often focused on gender relations, gender ideologies, and gendered inequalities relating to production, consumption, and distribution of household resources, assets, and wealth. More recent studies from the Pacific have noted the changing nature of the socioeconomic contexts in the Pacific Island countries and the associated impact on gender relations and women’s and men’s realities and statuses (Macintyre 2017).
3. Participants gave their informed consent to take part in this study. For ethical considerations, their privacy is protected through de-identification of data.
4. For a more detailed discussion on the methodology, methods, sampling size, and selection of participants across Tonga and Vanuatu, see Chattier *et al.* (2018).

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