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**PACIFIC ISLANDS**  
HIV AND STI RESPONSE FUND  
2009–2013



**SPC**  
Secretariat  
of the Pacific  
Community

Reference E.  
Gender and HIV: some issues to  
consider

Resources for developing National Strategic Frameworks



SPC  
Secretariat  
of the Pacific  
Community

## Gender & HIV



Suzanne O'Neill,  
with acknowledgement to Robyn Drysdale  
and Linda Petersen (SPC Human Development Program  
Manager)

# Feminisation of HIV & STI in the Pacific

- In 2009: 47% of new HIV infections in the Pacific are among women & girls
  - increase from 25% in 1990
- Main mode of transmission of HIV
  - unprotected heterosexual activity - 91%
  - Mother to child – 5%
- WHO-SPC 2006 surveillance found 1:5 women are infected with chlamydia
  - Infections increase risk x5-fold IF exposed to HIV
  - PNG IMR study found 94% of women had 2 or more STIs at the same time
- Women aged 15-49 Kiribati (68%) & Solomon's (64%) reported experiencing Gender based violence
- UNICEF study in Vanuatu, Kiribati and Solomon's reported that over half of sexually active girls and women reported experience of forced sex

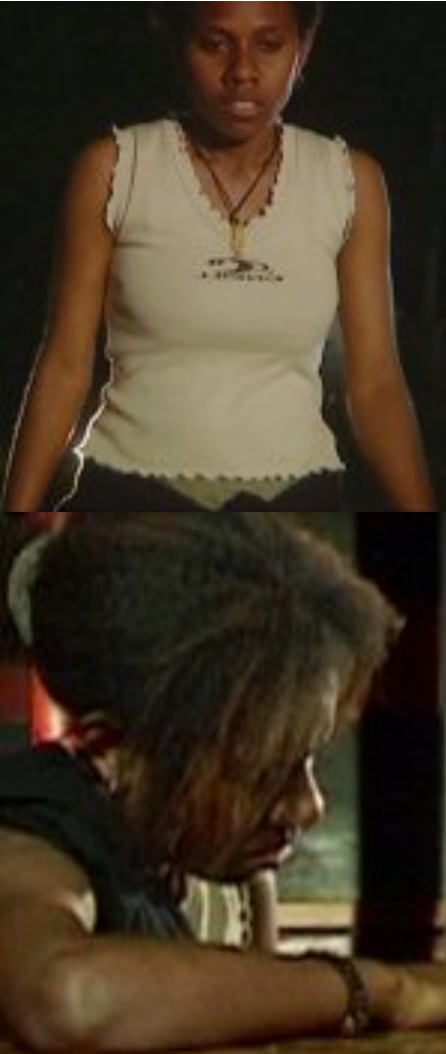
# Women's vulnerability

## Increased vulnerability – health factors:

- Women are more vulnerable because of physiological differences
- Chronic curable STIs, chronic ill health and immune suppression
- Lack of access to health services and sexual health information



# Women's vulnerability

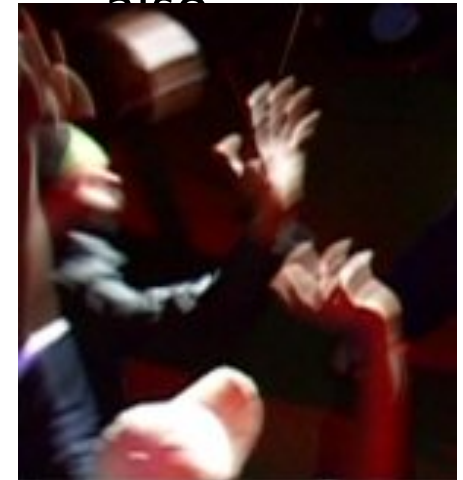


## **Increased vulnerability – social and cultural factors:**

- Poverty, marginalisation, economic dependence
- Inability to negotiate safe sex
- Blame, guilt, stigma, discrimination
- Sexual coercion & sexual violence
- Less participation in decision making, particularly about sex
- Low functional literacy rates, less access to education
- Lack of perception of personal risk

# The role of violence

- Gender based violence, including emotional, physical and sexual violence, are serious issues across the Pacific
- These are associated with increased sexually transmitted infections and risk of HIV infection
- Male-to-female sexual transmission of HIV happens more easily than female-to-male transmission, more so if sex is forced or rough (especially for female youth & menopausal women)
- Sexual abuse & sexual exploitation reported in many countries



# PACNEWS—26 Feb 2007

## **‘Sailors blamed for child sex trade in Kiribati’**


- Korean sailors' sexual exploitation of Kiribati young girls on their vessels berthed at Betio port or at bars near the port had been a serious and longstanding problem
- In general, Korean sailors refuse to use condoms

Kiribati National Youth Commission report 2007



# Survival sex

**Economic insecurity** – can result in women engaging in ‘transactional sex’ (sex in exchange for money, goods and services)

- Labelled trade  ainen mataawa  
kaba waqa
- Ages range from 14 yrs (some secondary school students)
- Peer groups and also individual activities
- Presence of middle workers (‘pimps’)
- Earnings = fish, gifts etc to set amounts of cash
- Violence & abuse - is quite common
- Entertainment - built around the trade eg. bars



# Men's vulnerability to HIV

Men's behaviour is constrained by traditional beliefs and expectations, cultural and social norms, and economic and political factors

- Social and cultural attitudes to sex and vulnerability
- Number of sex partners, polygamy, traditional practices
- Range of sexualities & lack of forums to talk about this
- Low rates condom acceptance / usage
- Links between alcohol and socialising
- Male occupations
- Violence
- Poverty
- Cultures in transition



# Myths



Prevalent in the Pacific & strongly influence attitudes, behaviours AND access to services

- **“Marriage will protect you”**
- **“Promoting condoms promotes sex”**

# MARRIAGE AND HIV RISK & VULNERABILITY

## A LESSON FROM PUNE, INDIA

Of a sample of 400 women attending STI clinics in the city, 93% were married and 91% had never had sex with anyone but their husband.

**All** of the women were infected with an STI and 13.6% tested positive for HIV.

Source: UNAIDS (1999)2

**Myth:** “Marriage will protect you”

# And in the Pacific?

- While married women can be at risk of HIV infection through their own sexual practices; they are **mainly** vulnerable and at risk from the sexual relationships of their husbands, and from violence that occurs outside of & within marriages, including rape and forced sex
  - In PNG, marriage has been significantly identified as a risk factor for women for HIV infection (Hammar, in press; Lakshman, 2004; NHASP, 2005; UNFPA, 2005b)



# Barriers to prevention for women

- Stigma of HIV
- Women often unaware of partner's infection status or level of risk
- Women may be unable to negotiate safer sex practices
  - Sexual coercion
  - Domestic violence
  - Economic vulnerability

# Prevention messages

- Reliance on the ABC hierarchy in the Pacific:

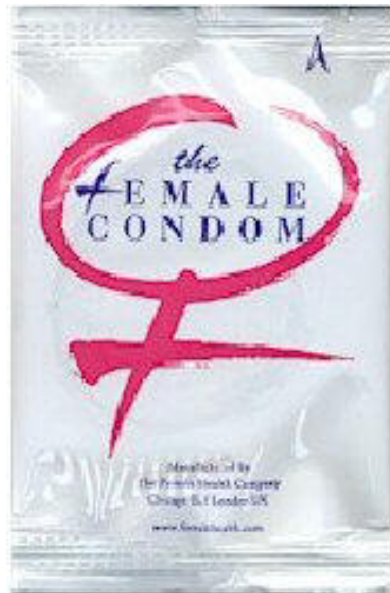
**A**bstain; **B**e faithful; **C**ondom use

- **A** in the context of the Pacific where many women have little or no control over their sexual activity?
- **B** see the previous myth!
- **C** stigma associated with condoms; relies on the women being able to negotiate condom use

# Maximising prevention possibilities for women

Promoting options – instead of ‘which is better’? A, B, C, D.....

**More is better!**





# Women at community level



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- STIs – prevented & treated
- Mother to child transmission of HIV prevented
- Break down the myths eg. *Marriage will protect you*
- Increase availability, accessibility & acceptability of services and products
- **PLUS** addressing the underlying factors of risk and vulnerability – with both women & men

Methods, programs and policies that have the greatest potential for **promoting and supporting women's sexual & reproductive health rights**