

## Book Reviews

Dharma Chandra & Vasemaca Lewai (2005) *Women and Men of Fiji Islands: Gender Statistics and Trends*. Suva: Population Studies Programme Demographic Report 10, University of the South Pacific, xvii + 176pp.

Vice-President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi tells us in the Foreword to this important report that 'it is only when women can achieve all they are capable of, freed from the constraints of custom, tradition and culture which prescribe gender roles, that we as a nation [can] achieve our full potential' (p. v).

The goal of the two authors, one a lecturer in demography at the University of the South Pacific, the other a divisional manager for social statistics in the Bureau of Statistics, is to show us where women are at with respect to that national goal. In addition they set out to reveal areas still to be addressed by policy, to dispel gender myths, misconceptions and stereotypes, and to demonstrate the economic contribution women already make to society (p. 5).

These are worthy goals for what is really a path-breaking study of gender in Fiji, grounded in the reality of statistical evidence. Eight of its ten chapters take us through a comprehensive range of topics: demographics, education, health, family, the labour market, business, decision-making and social issues. In each of these chapters the authors highlight the main features of gender relations and discuss their implications, of which there are many: Fiji's population is aging; marriage and families are starting later (particularly for Fijians); primary and secondary education is largely gender neutral; the health status of men and women differ; family sizes have declined; nuclear families have increased in number (including those headed by sole parents); women are more economically engaged than before but are still disadvantaged and need to move away from gendered vocational training; and women are heavily involved in vulnerable small and micro businesses designed to alleviate poverty, but

are still marginalized in terms of decision-making and tend to be the main victims of many social problems.

This is a small sample of the conclusions drawn from the wealth of data presented in each chapter and captured in useful summary form at the end of each chapter. Clearly we have here a first for Fiji, a State of the Gendered Nation report that should be on the desk of every legislator, senior public servant and social scientist. As such it presents a very different picture of Fiji from the usually ethnicized one. Indeed, without saying so, it suggests that if one wants to look for the greatest divide within Fiji one need go no further than gender. Politicians should take note.

The authors' intention is to inform decision-makers and the public in general about what has been achieved and also how much more needs to be done, particularly in the areas highlighted by each chapter. The publication is also a salutary reminder of the importance of gathering statistics in order to measure and evaluate past policies and to determine future action. Too often the authors find vast gaps in data on demography, education and training, health, economic activities, business, decision-making and social issues, and particularly with respect to gender. They recommend that the Census address some of these gaps and suggest that a more frequent Census, with results published more quickly, is essential for policy making. But above all, they call for a greater integration of gender into policy making and for more sex disaggregated data.

Chandra and Lewai justifiably deserve praise for this valuable work; one hopes that it is updated every five years as a monitoring and evaluation exercise.

One comment that should be made is that often the book lacks international comparisons, useful for benchmark purposes and to enable perspective. This is particularly the case, for example, on infant mortality rates. The only comparisons given are those for Pacific Islands (p. 52), which suggest that Fiji is doing well, but provide no indication of what Fiji's goal is or should be. The same comment applies to maternal mortality rates. The authors argue that 'health indicators for Fiji are much better than in other Pacific Island countries and less developed countries in general' (p. 78). Should Fiji pat itself on the back and rest on its laurels? On other occasions international comparisons are hinted at, for example when accounting for the propensity of girls to perform better than boys at school (p. 167), but no statistic is provided to back up the obviously correct assertion. The usefulness of international comparisons is demonstrated during the brief discussion on adolescent fertility rates (p.68), but the cause of such wide international disparities (the US has a higher adolescent fertility rate than Fiji, Australia a much lower one), including their

obvious implications for Fiji policy, is not touched on.

Similarly, when discussing diet we are told that a major contributing factor for high rates of non-communicable diseases is 'imported, especially Western, food' (p. 60). This is of course a gross generalization. Many 'western' food are just as healthy as 'traditional' food; what is at issue, as a latter quote makes clear, is the increasing 'sedentary lifestyles and high-fat energy diets' that afflict growing urban communities worldwide (p. 61). To dichotomize the issue misses the essential point. Similarly when describing 'traditional' food, we are informed that 'traditional food is generally recognized as healthy and balanced'. 'Traditional' food may be healthy, but they are not of themselves balanced; that is the result of human preference or access.

*Robbie Robertson  
Professor of Development Studies  
University of the South Pacific  
Email: robertson\_r@usp.ac.fj*