



UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

DEVELOPMENT FUTURES SERIES

December 2022

UNDP Global Policy Network Brief

Household and Care Work, Crisis, and Gender-Unequal Economies:

A Samoan Perspective

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Small Island Development States' (SIDS) natural features, relative isolation, typical dependence on external resources and limited domestic capacity to absorb shocks make many of them especially vulnerable to crises, including climate-change related environmental disasters and health emergencies. This policy brief argues that one such crisis, precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has amplified and perpetuated dynamics of gender inequality in Samoa, a Pacific SIDS. We posit that care and household work, the burden of which falls disproportionately on women, is a central nexus in these dynamics, which in turn affect Samoa's ability to cope with and spring back from this crisis. Based on this Samoan experience, we argue that care and household work deserves special attention from policymakers, especially in SIDS, because of its potentially central importance for gender-equity as well as for crisis-resilience and recovery.

In Samoa, a Pacific SIDS (population: 195,979),² care and household work, which is mostly unpaid, disproportionately falls on women. This work often directly shoulders the burden of crisis response. But it also enables and underpins other responses that are crucial in seeing an economy like Samoa's through crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, this work has underpinned a spike in the heavily male-dominated outflow of migrant labour that has played an important role in supporting Samoa's import-dependent economy with foreign exchange earnings during a time when other sources, such as tourism, essentially evaporated.

This policy brief contends that—given care and household work's centrality in supporting an economy like Samoa's generally and especially during crises—policymakers need to identify potential avenues of support and public provisions in this area. This would enhance the often under-recognized direct economic and social benefits of this work and strengthen the foundation this work provides for other crucially important economic activities such as migrant labour. In the late-pandemic Samoan context of significant anxiety over domestic labour shortages affecting the economy's ability to rebuild after the lifting of the

most restrictive COVID-19 emergency measures, public supports in this area would also enhance the country’s ability to respond to and spring back from a massive economic shock. From a human development or “development as freedom” perspective,³ loosening gender-unequal constraints on women’s time connected to care and household work would not only yield the above instrumental

benefits, but would also be desirable in its own right, as it would enhance women’s agency and choice, including with respect to participation in the labour market. Planning, debating and implementing public policy measures in this area also has the potential of opening up a space for broader societal discussions of the implications and value of gender norms.⁴

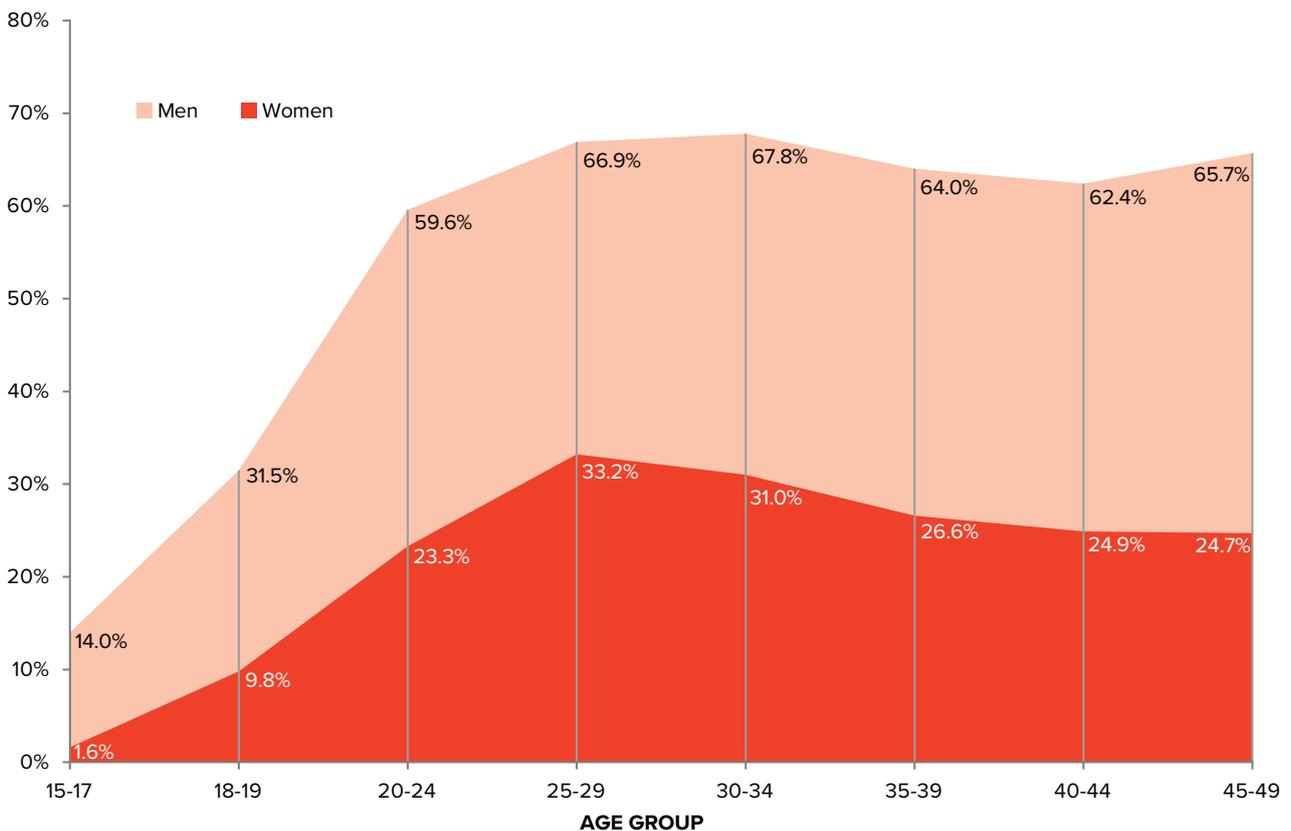
A Gendered Economy

A pronounced gendering of Samoa’s economy, long preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, is apparent in several dimensions.

In terms of the labour force participation rate, only 31.5% of women but 55% of men were in the labour force in 2017.⁵ Amplifying this disparity is a much higher rate of unemployment among women than among men. In 2017, for instance, 21.3% of women in the labour force were unemployed, twice the rate of men (10.6%). At 43.4%, young women faced the highest rates of unemployment, almost three times the national average of 14.5%.

Similar gender disparities are indicated by responses of Samoans aged 15-49 to a 2019-2020 survey. When asked about their main activities in the seven-day period leading up to the survey, male respondents were almost twice as likely (43.8%) than female respondents (23.4%) to cite an activity associated with being in the labour market.⁶ Figure 1 breaks down these averages by age cohort. Notably, women’s likelihood of engaging in labour market activities declines more than it does for men for cohorts older than 25-29 years, the age bracket with the highest fertility rate. This suggests that having children pushes women out of the labour force.

Figure 1 Share of Respondents Citing Labour Market Activities as Key Activity, by Age Group and Gender

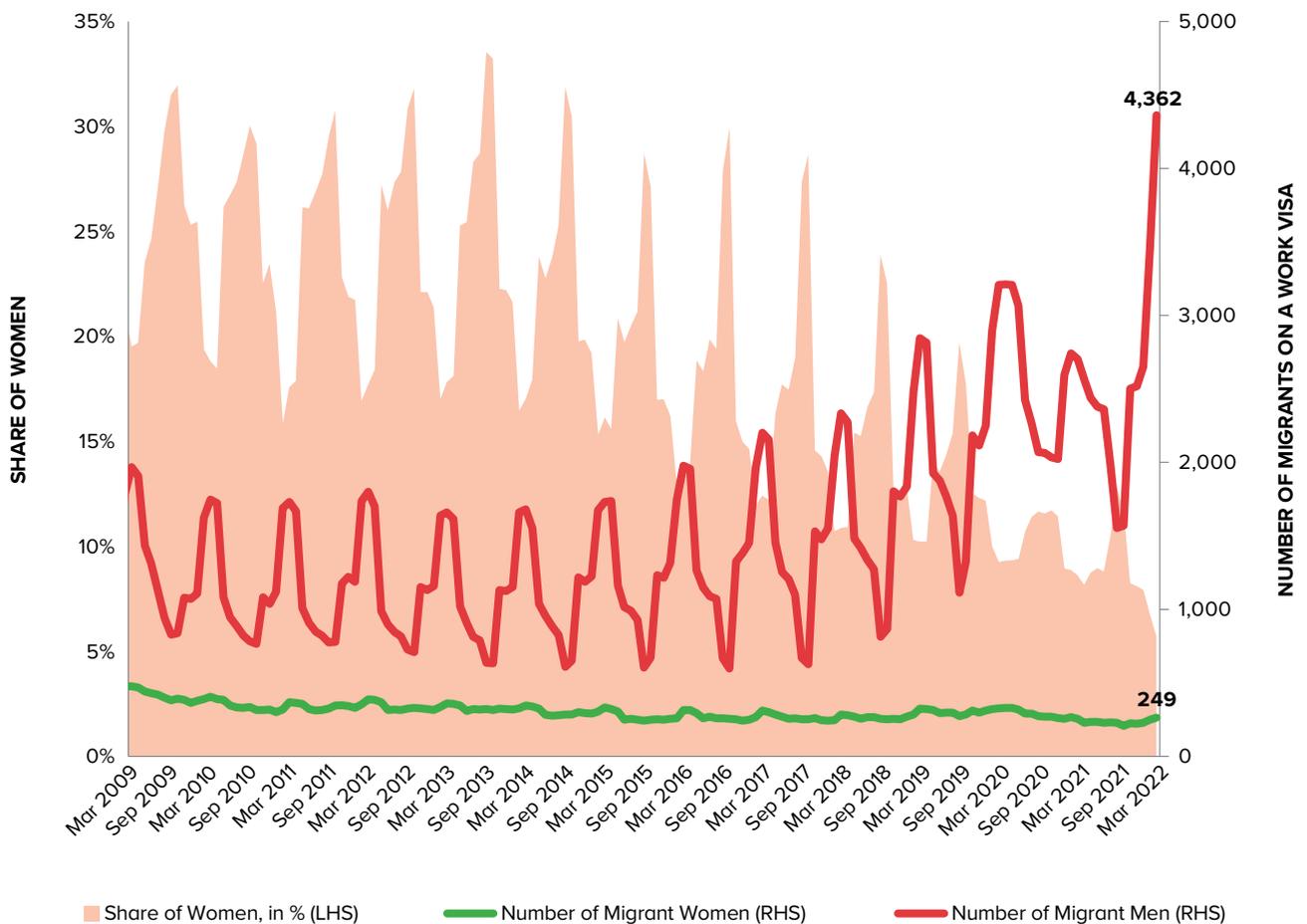


Source: Own compilation based on data from Samoa Bureau of Statistics Demographic and Health - Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019-2020

Labour migration is an important dimension of Samoa's economy. In March 2022, for instance, 4,626 Samoans were on work visas in New Zealand. This number is equivalent to 19% of the number of people employed in Samoa's domestic formal sector in March 2021, the latest month for which data is available.⁷ Labour migration contributes to remittances that are crucially important for Samoa's economy, not least because they help diversify risk.⁸ In 2020, for instance, remittances accounted for close to 20% of GDP, 37% of total imports and 123% of food and live animal imports.⁹ As most of the food products consumed in the country are imported,¹⁰ remittances have been essential to the country's food security, especially during the pandemic crisis. New Zealand and, secondarily, Australia are the main destinations for temporary migrant workers, a very large portion of whom are recruited under these countries' expanding seasonal work schemes serving the horticulture and viticulture industries.¹¹

Labour migration is heavily skewed towards men. Fully 94% of Samoan labour migrants in New Zealand in March 2022, for instance, were men. Figure 2 shows that the seasonally volatile number of male migrants has been on a steady upward trajectory since the mid-2010s. Strict border closures early in the COVID-19 pandemic broke this trend, but only briefly. Since early 2022, it has accelerated significantly. Women have not participated in this expansion. Indeed, since 2009, the total number of female migrants in New Zealand on work visas has been on a slight downward trend, and the percentage of women in the total Samoan migrant labour force in New Zealand has, correspondingly, collapsed (shaded area, Figure 2). This is in part due to the virtual absence of women from New Zealand's important and expanding Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme, a Samoan pattern that is shared by some but not all sending countries.¹²

Figure 2 Number of Migrants in New Zealand on a Work Visa (by Gender) and Share of Women (in %), July 2009-March 2022

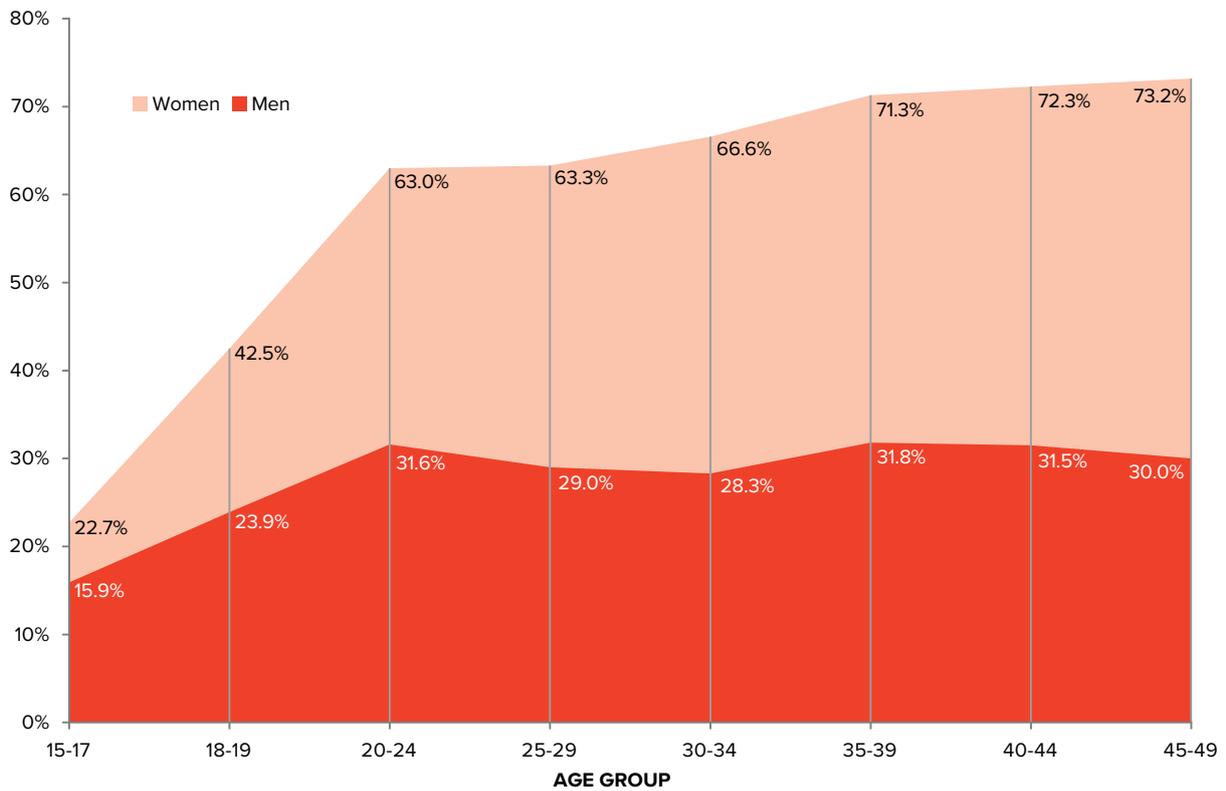


Source: Own compilation based on data from New Zealand's Migrant Data Explorer.¹³

The flip side of these gender disparities in the domestic and migrant labour markets is the gendered nature of care and household work within Samoan households. Although time-use data is not available in Samoa, the 2019-2020 Demographic and Health Survey indicates that this work is predominantly done

by women. When asked about their main activities in the seven days leading up to the survey, 60.5% of women cited “domestic duties.” This compares to fewer than half as many men (27.9%). Figure 3 shows that the gender gap in these responses is more pronounced the older the cohort.¹⁴

Figure 3 Share of Respondents Citing “Domestic Duties” as Key Activity, by Age Group and Gender



Source: Own compilation based on data from Demographic and Health - Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019-2020

Crises Amplify Gender-Unequal Economic Dynamics

Shocks tend to amplify and reinforce this gendered division of labour.¹⁵ SIDS are often especially vulnerable to such shocks—be they climate or, as in the cases of the COVID-19 pandemic and Samoa’s 2019 measles outbreak, health-related. The implications of shocks for gender inequalities therefore deserve particular attention in the context of SIDS.

Samoa’s COVID-19 response included closing its borders to essentially all travel. While this policy kept the country almost completely free of COVID-19 cases until early 2022, the resulting shutdown of the tourism sector¹⁶ had a very significant economic impact. Total earnings from

tourism amounted to approximately a quarter of the country’s GDP in 2018 and in 2019. In 2020, the accommodation and restaurant sector saw a contraction of 68%, almost eight times the contraction of the economy overall.¹⁷ Next to foreign aid, remittances—bolstered by the continuing and, since late 2021, surging flow of migrant labour (see Figure 2)—have been crucial in compensating for some of these losses.

Between 2020 and 2021, the peak number of Samoans in New Zealand on work visas decreased due to the halting of new labour migration into the country between March 2020 and early 2021. (In early 2021, Samoa was one of only three countries

to be able to significantly access an exceptional but highly restrictive quota under New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme.)¹⁸ However, heading into the February-June peak period in 2022, there was a pronounced surge in labour migration: There were 4,626 Samoan work-visa holders in New Zealand in March 2022 compared to 2,958 in March 2021 and 3,534 in March 2020 (Figure 2).¹⁹ Samoan interest in the limited number of available placements with seasonal work programmes has likewise been dramatic. In 2021, around 13,000 Samoans—a number equivalent to 56% of the total number of people employed in the domestic formal sector in the first quarter of 2021—applied to be included in the work-ready pool that supplies seasonal work programmes in the region. This compared to only 800 applicants registered domestically as job seekers.²⁰

These crisis-induced dynamics in the migrant labour sector have only amplified the already heavily gendered nature of labour migration. Looking again at labour migration to the predominant destination, New Zealand (Figure 2), it is evident that the spike in the number of migrants from late 2021 has been entirely driven by additional male migrants while the already low number of female migrants has collapsed further. In 2019, during the peak month of March, 324 Samoan female migrant workers were in New Zealand. That number had fallen to only 255 in 2021, and it remained almost as low, at 264, in March 2022. At that point in time, the overall number of migrant workers in New Zealand had surged by more than 50% from the previous year.

This further decline in female participation in the migrant labour economy came at the very time when, early in the pandemic, 87% of Samoan women polled reported that the time they spent on unpaid care work had increased, while 71% reported spending more time on unpaid domestic work.²¹ (Of the ten Asian and Pacific countries reporting results, Samoa registered by far the greatest gender disparities between women's and men's responses to this question.) The pandemic thus appears to have amplified co-dependent, heavily gendered patterns in domestic and migrant labour markets and time-use in Samoa. Female household and care work appears to enable men's labour market participation, including in the migrant labour sector.

Gendered labour migration in response to crises has been observed elsewhere, as has the link between male migration and increased reliance on female household and care work and a concomitant reduction in non-migrating women's participation in the labour force.²² Maharjan et al., for instance, argue that in South Asian "climate hotspots," where the climate crisis has driven migration, "as most migrants were men, there was an increase in the responsibility and labour burden for women left behind." They conclude that this "represents an important research dimension for future consideration, with important implications for adaptation policy and planning."²³ Because of the particular salience of these dynamics in Samoa, they deserve special attention here, as they do in similarly structured economies.

Worried about domestic labour shortages impeding a successful recovery of the Samoan economy, policymakers have paid attention to one aspect of these crisis-induced dynamics: the outflow of (male) labour. (In part, this concern drove a decision to halt migrant labour flights in early 2022.²⁴) A different perspective on the same concerns around domestic labour shortages might instead focus on female labour tied up in household and care duties—and proactively seek to loosen this constraint. Indeed, given how critically important remittances are for Samoa, it may be preferable to avoid undercutting their flow by curbing migration and instead focus on ameliorating society's reliance on women to do largely invisible household and care labour. This reliance represents a constraint not just on male migration, but also on *women's* participation in both the domestic and the migrant labour market.

The utility of such a gender-sensitive and systemic perspective extends beyond the current COVID-19 crisis. Other crises in Samoa have precipitated similar patterns, with comparable implications for women's ability to do work not focused on care or the household. When tropical cyclone Evan struck Samoa in 2012, causing damage and losses estimated at 28% of 2011's GDP, for instance, "women in the most affected areas ... reported spending more time on domestic chores, particularly fetching water." This reduced the time available for other economic activities that are also critical for the recovery from the crisis, such as work in agriculture.²⁵

Possibilities for Interventions and Vision

UN Women’s multi-dimensional approach to recognizing and investing in the care sector offers an excellent framework for designing policy interventions based on a recognition of household and care work’s pivotal role in shaping economies’ broader gender dynamics and their ability to respond to and spring back from crises.²⁶ This approach is based on recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care and household work.

Recognition requires improved data on care and household work, including its gendered dimensions. Due to its informal and “private” nature, this type of work is often invisible in economic statistics. Well-constructed, gender-sensitive time-use surveys provide important insights into the nature of unpaid household and care work and the time dedicated to it. They can also offer insights into how household and care work are related to gaps in services and infrastructure and into the opportunity costs and impact on well-being associated with such work.²⁷

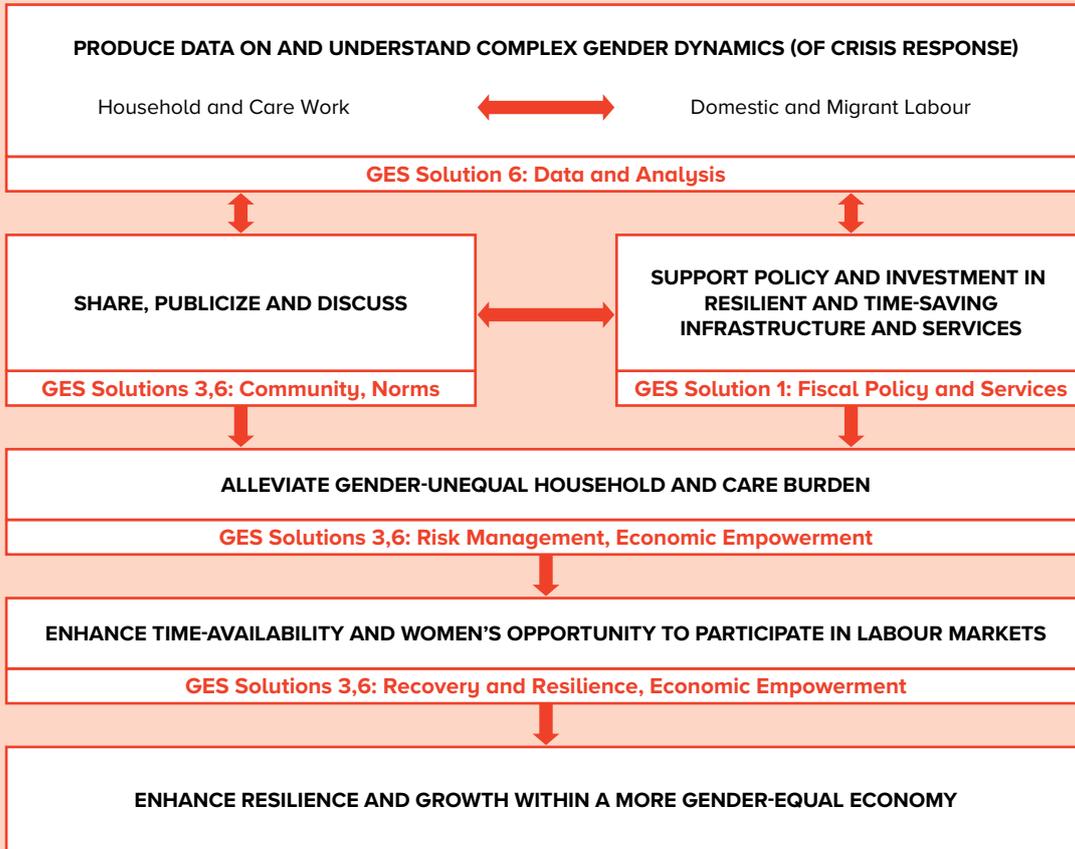
In Samoa, as in most countries in the Pacific, time-use data are not available. Improving the recognition of the value of such data, as well as the capacity of national statistics offices to produce them, is important and can draw on experiences in other countries, including other SIDS such as Cabo Verde.²⁸ Understanding how time allocation to unpaid care affects gendered dynamics in other sectors of the economy also requires gender-disaggregation of other data (e.g., in labour and household surveys) and the analytical capacity to use them to inform policy responses and budget allocations, guide public dialogues, raise awareness and challenge social norms.

Investing in social care service provision (e.g., childcare and preschool programmes) and—crucially important in a region that is especially

vulnerable in this respect—climate-resilient infrastructure (e.g., sanitation, electricity and piped water) can improve the quality of care available to society as a whole and reduce the time that is allocated to it (typically, by women). Moving some of this work out of the private realm of the household and into the realm of public provisions or the market would also redistribute some of this work’s burden. This would both expand choice for women and potentially secure efficiency and quality gains along the way.

Investing in care also offers an opportunity for growth, job creation and—in the context of especially crisis-vulnerable SIDS like Samoa—bolstering resilience. In Samoa, the development of a professional care sector could, for instance, offer the country the desired opportunity to diversify its economy and create decent job opportunities for both women and men, with potentially large synergies for the tourism sector. With 67% of tourism earnings coming from visitors from the ageing societies of New Zealand and Australia,²⁹ establishing a professionalized care sector may significantly bolster Samoa’s appeal as a destination. Furthermore, resilience would be enhanced by such investments, as well as by making labour markets more accommodating to care work that women may continue to provide within the household. Because such interventions would loosen constraints on women’s time, women’s participation in the labour market would be facilitated. This would move Samoa towards a more gender-balanced economy, a potentially more diversified pool of migrant workers and a more diversified and larger pool of domestic labour at a time of acute shortages. The box below summarizes these ideas with a view to UNDP’s potential role from the vantage point of the 2022-2025 GES.

TAKE-AWAYS FOR UNDP AND FOR OPERATIONALIZING THE GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY (GES) 2022-2025



Specific opportunities for UNDP include:

- Facilitation of knowledge exchange and cooperation initiatives on the production, dissemination and use of time-use data
- Provision of capacity development for national bureaus of statistics and mobilization of expertise and research capacity of national research and academic institutions, relevant ministries and local and community-based organizations
- Mobilization of resources—technical and financial—for data production and analysis
- Leveraging of Accelerator Labs’ capacities to develop tools for the inclusion of time-use analysis in the design and assessment of projects and initiatives
- Promotion of awareness campaigns in collaboration with civil society
- Supporting creation and transfer of knowledge about gender-sensitive budgeting processes, policies and investments that may facilitate reduction and redistribution of household and care work
- Directly facilitating and supporting such policies and investments

Endnotes

- 1 Heloisa Marone served as the Country Economist at the UNDP Multi-Country Office of Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tokelau from 2021 to 2022; email: hmarone@gmail.com. Leander Schneider is Associate Professor of Political Science at Concordia University in Montreal; email: leander.schneider@concordia.ca. The authors would like to thank Ana Maria Tribin, Public Policy Specialist at the UNDP Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean and Shivani Nayyar, Economic Affairs Officer at the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) for their review and helpful comments to this brief.
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- 4 UNDP (2020). *Tackling Social Norms: A Game Changer for Gender Inequalities*. <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2020-gender-social-norms-index-gsni>
- 5 Samoa Bureau of Statistics: *Labour Force Survey 2017*. <https://www.sbs.gov.ws/digi/2017-Social%20Statistics-Samoa%20LFS%20Report%202017.pdf>
- 6 Such activities included: being an employer, an employee, self-employed, working in subsistence mainly for sale and looking for a job. Data from Samoa Bureau of Statistics: Demographic and Health - Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019-2020. <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/4282/study-description>
- 7 Calculated using data from Samoa Bureau of Statistics: Employment Statistics, March 2021 Quarter. https://www.sbs.gov.ws/images/sbs-documents/Finance/Employment/2021/Employment-Report_March-2021-Quarter-Final.pdf
- 8 Government of Samoa – SDGs Task Force: Samoa's Second Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals 2020. <https://samoan.org/en/52796-samoas-second-voluntary-national-review-implementation-sustainable-development-goals>
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- 10 FAO (2020). *Food Security and Food Consumption in Samoa*. <https://www.fao.org/3/cb0613en/cb0613en.pdf>
- 11 On the New Zealand government's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSA) scheme, see: Bailey, Rochelle (2019). *New Zealand's Recognised Employer Scheme (RSE): 10 Year Longitudinal Case Study*. Australian National University, Department of Pacific Affairs. Also see the New Zealand government's website <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/about-us/research-and-statistics/research-reports/recognised-seasonal-employer-rse-scheme>. Other important streams of Samoan migration include an annual quota of up to 1,100 residence visas tied to employment and a partnership work visa programme covering around 450 Samoans per year who are in a stable relationship with a resident of New Zealand (Government of New Zealand, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2018): *Pacific Migrant Trends and Settlement Outcomes Report*). Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) is of relatively lesser importance for Samoa: In 2018/19, for instance, 2,400 recruits under the RSE compared to 648 under the SWP; in 2015/16, the latter number was still as low as 140, whereas the former was 1,454 (Perkiss, S., Taule'alo, T., Dun, O., Klockner, N., Liki, A. and Tanima, F. (2022). "Exploring Accountability of Australia and New Zealand's Temporary Labour Mobility Programmes in Samoa Using a Talanoa Approach." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 35(4): 1061-1092.
- 12 In the 2019/20 recruitment season, only 2.8% of Samoan labour migrants under the scheme were women. Under the COVID-19 affected, more restrictive quota in 2020/21, this percentage diminished further to 2.1%, a 25% reduction (Bedford, Richard (2021): *Recruitment for the RSE Scheme, 2021/21: An Exceptional Year*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354380778_Recruitment_for_the_RSE_Scheme_202021_An_exceptional_year). Although several other countries also exhibit a similarly dramatic gender imbalance, it is not a characteristic of the programme overall. The total pool of Pacific recruits under the scheme featured a higher proportion of women, ranging between 11 and 15% between 2012 and 2017 (Government of New Zealand, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2018): *Pacific Migrant Trends and Settlement Outcomes Report*); and even in 2016/17 (11% of Pacific recruits were women), this proportion was as high as 59.8% for Malaysia and 43.9% for Kiribati (Bailey (2019) op.cit.).
- 13 Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, New Zealand Government, Migration Data Explorer. https://mbienz.shinyapps.io/migration_data_explorer/#
- 14 Samoa Bureau of Statistics: Demographic and Health - Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019-2020 op. cit.
- 15 See, for instance: UNCC Gender and Climate Change <https://unfccc.int/gender> (last accessed May 11, 2022); Madgavkar, A., White, O., Krishnan, M., Mahajan, D., and Azcue, X. (2020). "COVID-19 and Gender Equality: Countering the Regressive Effects." McKinsey Global Institute. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects>
- 16 According to Samoa's Central Bank, there have been no tourist arrivals since April 2020. Samoa Central Bank: T1 – Visitor Arrivals – Earnings – Average Expenditure and TPI – February 2022 <https://www.cbs.gov.ws/statistics/foreign-trade-report/> (last accessed May 11, 2022)
- 17 Calculated based on several Samoa Bureau of Statistics GDP Reports. <https://www.sbs.gov.ws/economics> (2. National Accounts)
- 18 775 Samoan recruits under this scheme in early 2021 compared to 2,409 in the 2018/19 season, the last unaffected by COVID-19 (Bedford, Richard (2021): *Recruitment for the RSE Scheme, 2021/21: An Exceptional Year*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354380778_Recruitment_for_the_RSE_Scheme_202021_An_exceptional_year.
- 19 New Zealand Immigration: Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Scheme. <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/about-us/research-and-statistics/research-reports/recognised-seasonal-employer-rse-scheme> (last accessed May 11, 2022).
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- 28 South-South Galaxy. "Time Use Survey that Triggered the Creation of the National Care System." <https://my.southsouth-galaxy.org/en/solutions/detail/Time-Use-Survey-that-Triggered-the-Creation-of-the-National-Care-System> (last accessed: May 11, 2022).
- 29 Data on tourism earnings from Central Bank: T1 – Visitor Arrivals – Earnings – Average Expenditure and TPI – February 2022 <https://www.cbs.gov.ws/statistics/foreign-trade-report/> (last accessed May 11, 2022)