Labour Mobility and Women's Private Sector Employment: The Case of Vanuatu

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Intro

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, participation in Pacific labour mobility schemes expanded rapidly. By late 2023, roughly 40,000 Pacific Islanders were employed in Australia through the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, and a further 19,000 visas were available through New Zealand's counterpart Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme (Howes, 2024). Pacific labour mobility schemes have the potential to bring may benefits to participating countries through income and skills gains (Doan, Dornan, & Edwards, 2023; World Bank, 2017). However, as participation rates have increased significantly in recent years, sending country governments have repeatedly raised concerns about the impacts of labour mobility on home country labour markets which often have limited pools of skilled labour in certain industries or sectors (Meleisea, 2023). At the same time, and reflecting the male dominated nature of labour mobility participation, there have been some reports of increased employment, leadership and entrepreneurship opportunities for women in the private sector including businesses implementing strategies to adapt to a changing labour market with fewer men. The evidence for this is largely anecdotal with limited documentation and analysis on the impact and opportunities for women in the private sector over the short and long term.

This report explores the impacts of labour mobility on opportunities for women in the private sector in Vanuatu. With participation concentrated in seasonal employment (RSE and PALM Short), Vanuatu has long been one of the top labour sending countries to Australia and New Zealand's labour mobility schemes. Men have accounted for roughly 80 percent of visa grants since the schemes began. This report begins by summarising Vanuatu's participation in the labour mobility schemes and current labour market trends within Vanuatu. It then introduces the research questions and methodology before considering labour mobility impacts on the private sector, how businesses are coping with labour losses, and opportunities for and barriers to women's employment and entrepreneurship as a strategy to address labour shortages. While findings suggest that labour mobility does not currently seem to be increasing women's participation in the private sector, creating employment and training opportunities for women could represent one possible solution to current skills and labour shortages. Importantly, promoting women's economic activity and access to training opportunities aligns closely with national policy goals including those presented in *Vanuatu 2030: The People's Plan*[1] (Government of Vanuatu, 2021) and the *National Gender Equality Policy 2020-2030*[2]

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[1] Relevant economic policy objectives in *The People's Plan* include:
ECO 4.5 Increase the number of decent, productive employment opportunities, particularly for young women and men and people with disabilities.
ECO 4.6 Ensure the health and safety, employment rights and skills development of the workforce
ECO 4.9 Strengthen dialogue between government and the private sector, and enact a robust governance framework for effective partnerships
[2] Strategic Area 2 of the *Policy* focuses on 'Enhancing women's economic empowerment and skills development' with the following objectives:

(Department of Women's Affairs, 2021). The report concludes with recommendations for increasing women's private sector participation aimed at both government and private sector stakeholders.

Labour mobility schemes in Vanuatu

The RSE and PALM schemes allow citizens from participating countries to travel to Australia and New Zealand for employment on temporary contracts. Established in 2007, New Zealand's RSE scheme offers contracts of an average 6-month duration for seasonal work in the horticulture and viticulture industries. Modelled on the RSE scheme, Australia's PALM Short (previously known as the Seasonal Worker Programme or SWP) began in 2012 and allows Pacific Islanders to work in seasonal horticulture and accommodation on contracts of 6-9 months. The majority of PALM Short employment has been in horticulture. In 2018, Australia's guestworker opportunities were expanded through the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS, now PALM Long) which allows non-seasonal employment in industries including aquaculture, labour hire (agriculture), tourism, hospitality and aged care. The labour mobility schemes[3] respond to extreme labour shortages in Australia and New Zealand, but also aim to promote development in sending countries through remittances and skills transfers. Prior to the schemes' establishment, opportunities for ni-Vanuatu to migrate internationally were extremely limited, and labour mobility through the RSE and PALM schemes accounts for the vast majority of international out-migration from Vanuatu.

Vanuatu was the first sending country to adopt policies around labour mobility participation. The *Seasonal Employment Act* was adopted in 2007 to manage participation in the RSE scheme. This was followed in 2019 by a *National Labour Mobility Policy*, which responded to the growing participation rates and expanded opportunities for labour mobility that had evolved since the 2007 *Act*. As participation rates continued to increase, Vanuatu's labour mobility policy was again reviewed in 2023, and the *Vanuatu National Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan 2024 – 2027* was drafted. The policy, which was adopted by the Government of Vanuatu in 2024, focuses on minimising negative impacts while maximising the positive outcomes of labour mobility. Of relevance to this research, the policy aims to ensure that labour mobility participation leads to sustainable livelihoods and economic growth within Vanuatu and will include the preparation of a *Labour Mobility Supply Management & Reintegration Strategy*. It is intended that entrepreneurship and skills development activities will be targeted at labour market sectors that are experiencing skills shortages and that have the potential for economic growth including: agriculture (to complement the *Agriculture Reintegration Framework*); hospitality and tourism; construction and trades; industry; green energy and women's economic empowerment pilot projects. The policy also aims to support and facilitate objectives under other national policies including the *National Gender Equality Policy.*

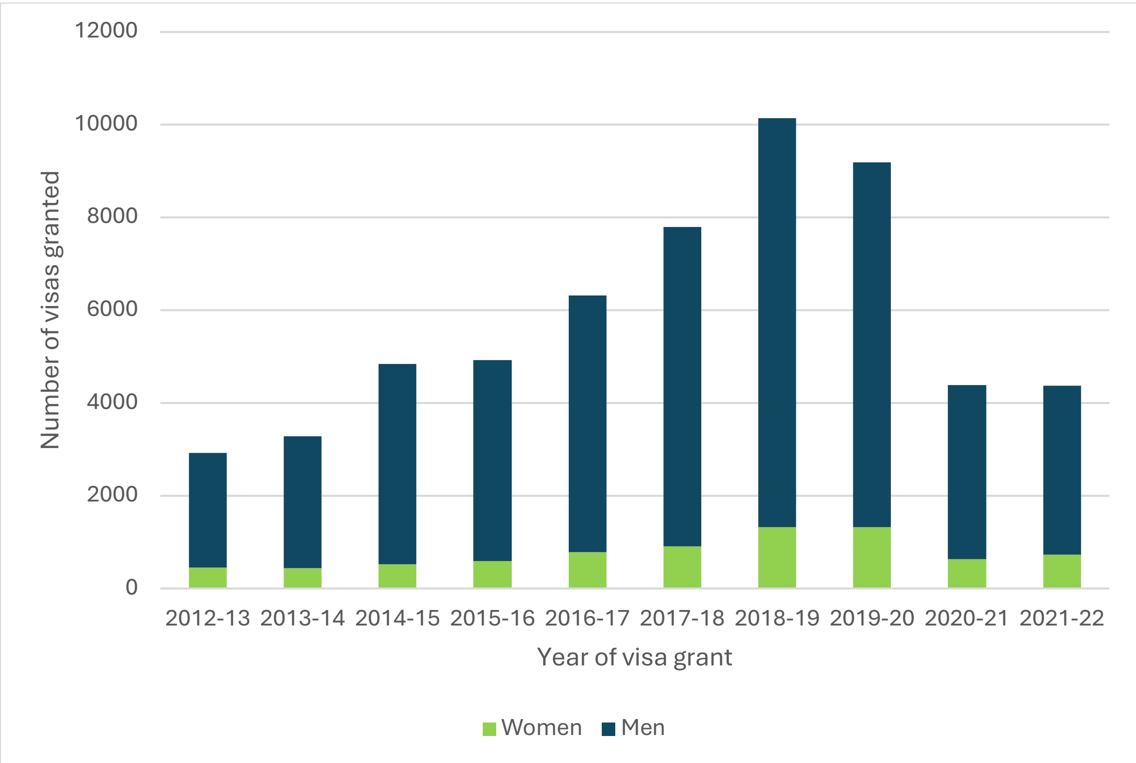
2.1 To provide formal schooling that is inclusive and safe for male and female students
2.2 To support upskilling of women and job creation for young women to increase workforce diversity
2.3 To promote fair and equitable employment, wealth and workplaces

[3] Throughout this report, the term 'labour mobility' refers to the PALM and RSE schemes.

Vanuatu has a long history of engagement in the Pacific labour mobility schemes and has consistently been one the largest contributors of workers to the RSE and PALM schemes. Vanuatu was among the first countries to participate in both New Zealand's RSE trial and Australia's Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme (PSWPS). Continued support for labour mobility from the Vanuatu Government, employer familiarity with and confidence in ni-Vanuatu workers and the agent system of recruitment have all contributed to Vanuatu's position as one of the top labour sending countries to Australia and New Zealand's respective guestworker schemes (Bedford, Bedford, & Nunns, 2020; Curtain & Howes, 2020).

Men have dominated participation in labour mobility from Vanuatu, accounting for roughly 87 percent of visa grants over the lifetime of the labour mobility schemes (Figure 1). This male dominance has been attributed to factors including employer preferences for male workers alongside cultural and gender norms in sending countries that discourage women's participation in labour mobility (World Bank, 2018, 2023). The inclusion of industries in PALM Long, such as aged care and hospitality, that are perceived to be 'women friendly' aimed to increase women's participation in labour mobility. However, and while women accounted for roughly 48 percent of total labour mobility scheme participants in 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic alongside extreme labour shortages in the (male dominated) Australian meatworks industry meant that by 2021 women's participation plummeted to around 20 percent (Petrou & Connell, 2023). However, recent innovations, such as the Aged Care Expansion (ACE) programme, that focuses on recruiting women into Australia's aged care industry, may again see the proportion of women participants increase.

Figure 1. Total labour mobility visa grants by gender for Vanuatu, 2012-2021



Source: provided by the Department of Home Affairs (for Australia) and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (for NZ). Data covers all labour mobility schemes (SWP/PLS/PALM/RSE).

While participation rates were initially low, as the number of workers has increased and contract durations have lengthened, concerns have been raised over the social and economic impacts of labour mobility in Vanuatu. In the early years, employer uptake of the Pacific labour mobility schemes was relatively low. In Australia, this was attributed to employer unfamiliarity with the schemes alongside the administrative burdens associated with participation (e.g. the requirement for employers to provide accommodation and pastoral care) (Doyle & Howes, 2015). However, participation numbers expanded each year and by the 2018-19 financial year, roughly 24 percent of ni-Vanuatu men aged 20-49 years engaged in the seasonal labour mobility schemes (Bedford et al., 2020). The sharp increase in participation rates from late 2020 onwards, alongside the expansion of long-term opportunities under the PALM scheme, which have significantly extended periods of absence, has led to concerns amongst sending country governments and communities.

High male participation rates in labour mobility are impacting gender roles and norms in sending communities. Existing research points to both negative and positive impacts on worker's communities. Participation in labour mobility can increase workloads for remaining spouses and female family members who take on extra chores to make up for their male family member's absence. These chores can include increased care responsibilities for children and elderly family members as well as food production and consumption activities (Bedford et al., 2020; World Bank, 2018). In rural Vanuatu, there is some evidence that labour mobility is leading to labour shortages for physically demanding tasks such as subsistence agriculture and community work (World Bank, 2023). There is also growing concern over the social impacts of labour mobility such as family breakdown (Withers, 2022) and the potential for gender-based violence (Kaiapam, 2022; Rockell, 2015; World Bank, 2023). At the same time, high rates of male participation can lead to increased leadership, empowerment and other opportunities for women who remain at home. Across the Pacific, this has included women learning male dominated skills, such as how to drive, and taking on other community responsibilities normally performed by men (Bedford et al., 2020; World Bank, 2023). In addition, there is some evidence that labour mobility participation can lead to increased household harmony when money, or the lack thereof, was previously a source of conflict (World Bank, 2023). However, and while it is clear that labour mobility is having mixed impacts on sending communities, little is known about whether labour mobility is impacting women's private sector employment opportunities.

Women and the labour force

While progress has been made towards gender equality at the policy level, in practice women in Vanuatu can face significant structural barriers to entering the labour force. Vanuatu has signed the *Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration* and has ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* (1995) and the *Optional Protocol* (2007). At the national level, the *National Gender Equality Policy 2020-2030* emphasizes the need to confront and eliminate factors that contribute to discrimination against women and is supported by six *Provincial Gender Equality Action Plans 2020-2024*. Nonetheless, and while *kastom*[4] remains important to ni-Vanuatu society, it is widely

[4] Indigenous knowledge, beliefs, values and practices.

acknowledged that cultural norms and traditional social structures that encourage the gender segregation of roles may hinder progress towards gender equality and women obtaining employment outside of the home. Indeed, the *National Gender Equality Policy* 'acknowledges the role of *kastom* in being both a support and barrier to women's advancement in Vanuatu' (UN Women 2022j cited in PSDI, 2024). Reflecting this, ni-Vanuatu women remain underrepresented in leadership roles within communities, the workforce and national government (PSDI, 2024).

While Vanuatu's urban areas continue to grow, the majority of the population (78 percent) is located in rural areas (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2022) and formal sector employment is limited. Rural populations tend to live in small villages and most rely on subsistence agriculture to meet their daily needs. Many rural residents are involved in the small-scale cultivation of cash crops including kava, coconut and cocoa. However, Vanuatu's susceptibility to natural disasters alongside limited infrastructure and unreliable transport can present challenges to cash cropping. The formal sector is relatively small, with formal sector employment concentrated in Vanuatu's two towns, Port Vila and Luganville. Roughly 67 percent of the population works in the informal sector, with women accounting for 68 percent of the informal sector workforce[5].

In Vanuatu, men are more likely to hold employment than women. Ni-Vanuatu women face gender specific barriers to employment and business establishment including social and cultural norms that position women as responsible for caregiving and other domestic duties; domestic violence; access to fewer business networks than men; and lack of access to training opportunities as well as limited access to land ownership and other forms of traditional capital (Voigt-Graf, 2023). Consistent with this, census data from 2020 indicates that men have a higher Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) and Employment Population Ratio (EPR) than women, and that the LFPR and EPR are higher in urban than rural areas. Similarly, men have a lower unemployment rate than women, and unemployment is higher in urban areas (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2022)[6] (Table 1).

Table 1. Labour force participation in Vanuatu, 2020

Location/gender	Labour force participation rate	Employment-population ratio	Unemployment rate
Vanuatu	**46.7**	**43.9**	**6**
Men	51.5	48.5	5.8
Women	42.1	39.4	6.3
Urban	**54.1**	**48.9**	**9.6**
Men	61.2	55.7	9
Women	47.2	42.3	10.3

[5] https://www.ilo.org/resource/project-document/voice-informal-economy-workers-vanuatu
[6] Census data from 2020 was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and were likely impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns and associated job losses.

Rural	**44.3**	**42.3**	**4.6**
Men	48.3	46.1	4.5
Women	40.4	38.5	4.8

Source: VNSO (2022)

In 2020, roughly a third (29 percent) of people in paid employment were working in Vanuatu's private sector. Of this, the majority (19,631) were employees. Shefa province, where Port Vila is located, accounted for the highest proportion of private sector employees (42.5 percent), while Penama had the lowest proportion of private sector employees (5.8 percent). Agriculture, forestry and fishing was the largest industry, accounting for 42.3 percent of paid employment (Table 2), followed by wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and household activities. Some employment types are heavily concentrated in urban or rural areas. For example, despite its significance, only 3.3 percent of people employed in urban areas worked in agriculture, forestry or fishing. By contrast more people in urban than rural areas were employed in manufacturing (54.5 percent), electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning (62.4 percent) and financial and insurance activities (59.2 percent). Data from the 2009 census showed men dominated all economic activities except for household activities. However, by 2020 diversification was evident and women dominated employment in education, accommodation and food services, wholesale and retail trade, human health and social work (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2022). It is not clear if labour mobility has influenced these patterns.

Table 2. Employed population by economic sector, urban-rural residence and gender, Vanuatu 2020

Economic sector	Urban		Rural	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Accommodation and food services activities	488	837	430	761
Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies	180	135	331	145
Activities of HHs as employers undifferentiated goods and services producing activities of HHs for own use	192	644	1497	2264
Administrative and support service activities	591	532	521	392
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	426	294	17310	15308
Arts, entertainment and recreation	189	166	131	166
Construction	1508	35	2328	54
Education	431	771	1182	1892
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	202	51	129	24
Financial and insurance activities	286	345	173	262
Human health and social work activities	283	414	346	458
Information and communication	199	138	200	96
Manufacturing	970	712	733	667
Mining and quarrying	22	6	41	5
Other service activities	767	884	1245	1131
Professional, scientific and technical activities	219	102	173	103
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	1056	436	502	145

Real estate activities	40	29	57	44
Transportation and storage	1233	173	1379	62
Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	74	14	68	11
Wholesale and retail trade repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	1195	1491	1029	1072
Unknown	1559	1249	1184	1110
Total	**12110**	**9458**	**30989**	**26172**

Source: VNSO (2022)

As for industry of employment, there are clear gendered trends in terms of the occupational groups men and women tend to belong to. In 2020, men dominated most occupational categories especially those such as plant and machine operators and assemblers that are generally considered 'male' occupations. Women dominated employment in elementary occupations professionals, service and sales workers and clerical support workers (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Employed population by gender and occupational category, Vanuatu, 2020

Source: VNSO (2022, p.77)

Vanuatu has long had a shallow skills base and small employment pool. The longstanding mismatch between skill gaps and training opportunities within Vanuatu led to the development of a *National Human Resource Development Plan (2020-2030)* which aims to 'guide investment in Post-School Education and Training (PSET) to ensure available PSET resources are more efficiently and effectively used' (Government of Vanuatu, 2020a p.3). Across the public and private sectors, there is an identified need for managerial, professional and technician/associate professional skills.[7] Within the private sector, employers report that

[7] Skills gaps include technicians including those in the fields of engineering science, manufacturing, construction, information and communications technology (ICT), ship and aircraft control, medical, and biological sciences as well as teaching and healthcare staff including teacher aids, nursing and midwifery

finding skilled workers is the most significant issue that they face with the following roles identified as the most difficult to recruit for: business services and administration managers (especially general managers, human resource managers and information technology managers), finance professionals, engineering, finance, and social (archaeology, anthropology and ethnology) professionals, marketing and sales, chefs, maritime, aviation and ICT technicians and associate professionals, building frame and related trades workers, building finishers and related trades workers and electrical equipment installers (Government of Vanuatu, 2020b). In sum, domestic skills needs are both extensive and wide ranging and in instances where only a handful of people hold a particular skill set, their movement out of an industry – whether for labour mobility or other reasons – can have a significant impact on the domestic labour market.

To date, the upskilling of Vanuatu's domestic labour force has been hindered by a lack of suitable training options. Until recently, most accredited qualifications were offered at Vanuatu Qualification Framework Level 1 or 2 i.e. training for entry level positions. However, and as outlined above, domestic skill demand is concentrated at the management, professional, technician and associate professional levels. Such positions require qualifications at a minimum of Certificate 3 or above and require trainers who hold higher level qualifications (Government of Vanuatu, 2020b). A recent overhaul of the PSET sector, including the establishment of new Certificate 4 and Diploma courses, scheduled to begin in 2025, may reduce issues around the skills-labour market mismatch. Significantly, these new courses may provide an opportunity to encourage women to move into non-traditional roles and potentially fill labour market gaps created by men who have participated in labour mobility. The Asian Development Bank has developed a project to strengthen training opportunities at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology with a focus on interventions on reaching women including gender-responsive infrastructure and facilities and targeted training and outreach activities for women and people with disabilities (ADB 2024).

Research questions & themes

This research sought to answer the overarching question: How can labour mobility sending governments support increased participation/opportunities for women in the private sector in their country? In so doing, it focused on women's workforce participation across a range of business types and industries in the private sector including those that traditionally do and do not hire women. Sub-questions and themes to be investigated included:

- Have research participants observed any trends or changes in workforce composition in the private sector since the labour mobility schemes began? (Observations may include e.g. age and gender of employees, location and sector of business)
    - What other factors are contributing to women's employment in the private sector?
- What strategies (if any) have government used to address changes in the labour market?
- What strategies (if any) have businesses/industry associations used to adapt to changes in the labour market?

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aids and other health associate professionals, finance, administrative, regulatory, ICT and legal associate professionals (Government of Vanuatu, 2020b).

    - Have businesses employed/promoted more women? Into what types of positions? Why/why not?
    - If so, what have the impacts of having more women in the workforce, or in business leadership been?
- What is the quality of women's increased participation in the private sector, particularly regarding pay parity, skills development and leadership?
- What are the barriers/challenges and enablers to more women being employed in the private sector versus other types of employment and/or not working?
    - For women?
    - For businesses?
- What policy settings/programs would be required to support increased workforce participation by women as a solution to labour shortages in the private sector in sending countries?

While entrepreneurship was not a focus of this research, some participants did discuss opportunities for women's entrepreneurship that had arisen as a result of labour mobility participation (either their own, or that of a family member). Tentative findings around the theme of entrepreneurship are thus presented below, however more research is needed to fully explore this topic.

To capture different views and perspectives of labour mobility impacts on the private sector, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following participant groups in and around Port Vila and Luganville between February and April 2024.

Employers: An attempt was made to speak with owners and managers from both formal and informal sector businesses covering a range of business sizes and industries including those that traditionally employ women and those that do not.

Key stakeholders from government and industry: Key stakeholders were interviewed who could provide broad insights into trends that are being observed within specific industries or sectors. This included representatives from relevant government departments and industry association representatives.

Potential participants were identified by the fieldwork team and invited to participate in an interview. Snowballing was employed to complement direct participant recruitment. Research fatigue hindered data collection, and fewer interviews were conducted than the initial target of ten key stakeholders and 20 business owners/managers per location (Table 3). Similarly, some of the largest employers in Vanuatu declined to participate or did not respond to invitations. Nonetheless, interviews covered a variety of industries including tourism, retail, construction, maritime, banking and trades, and offer useful insights into experiences across different sectors.

Table 3. Interviews completed by location and participant type

Participant type	Port Vila	Santo	Total

Key stakeholders	7	1	8
Business owners/managers	15	17	32
Total	22	18	40

Labour mobility impacts on Vanuatu's private sector

Study participants generally agreed that labour mobility had negatively impacted Vanuatu's private sector workforce with tourism, construction and industries requiring technical skills (e.g. refrigeration and engineering) the most affected. This is a significant impact considering these are some of the largest employment sectors in Vanuatu (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2022). Participants observed that while they did not know numbers, tourism and hospitality seemed to be badly impacted by worker losses due to labour mobility, as did technical and trade skills. Several participants dated the rise of labour mobility participation by tourism workers to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which tourism ceased and many tourism sector employees lost their jobs. Participating in labour mobility at this time was thus a means to earn an income when domestic employment opportunities were limited. Since COVID-19 travel restrictions were lifted, the tourism industry has faced further challenges including the twin Tropical Cyclones Judy and Kevin that hit within 72 hours of one another in March 2023 alongside ongoing issues with the national carrier, Air Vanuatu, and its eventual collapse in early 2024. Consequently, tourism has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels (Connell, 2024), with likely long-term implications for people seeking employment overseas.

Most businesses interviewed had lost employees to labour mobility schemes, however the extent of labour losses varied, and appeared to be related to business size rather than employees' gender. While some employers reported a relatively high turnover of staff, especially in the construction and tourism industries, others had only lost one or two employees to labour mobility. Smaller businesses and those with strong ties to local communities were the least likely to report labour mobility impacts. One tourism industry employer noted:

> We are a family-run business that employs many family members. Because there is a strong sense of belonging, fewer people have left than in the other resorts and hotels in town. But even then, we have lost staff members to the labour mobility programs.

Similarly, one small tourism business on Santo reported they had been more impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing lack of tourists to their region than by labour mobility schemes. Several employers noted that more men seemed to be leaving for labour mobility than women, however in general participants did not identify clear gender trends related to worker losses. This contrasts with national data (Figure 1., above) that shows men account for the largest proportion of labour mobility visa grants. Most employers interviewed employed either predominantly men or predominantly women, so it is possible that gendered trends in labour mobility participation were not visible within their own workforces. It is also possible that men who participate in labour mobility are less likely to hold private sector employment, however more research would be needed to confirm whether this is the case.

Employers reported that both skilled and unskilled employees had left to participate in labour mobility schemes. While some participants had lost mainly unskilled employees, others reported significant skills losses. For example, a number of employers reported that it tended to be their lower skilled employees who had left. At the same time, other employers stated that they were experiencing a significant loss of skilled employees. While it is difficult to draw conclusions from the small sample, women employed in office jobs seemed unlikely to participate in labour mobility, as did men and women in higher skilled/supervisory roles. Several tourism industry employers commented on the loss of skilled chefs. Similarly, skilled trades people – mostly men – seemed to have relatively high rates of labour mobility participation as did men employed as unskilled labourers. More research is needed to confirm the accuracy of these observations. Several employers told of recruiters targeting skilled workers, such as drivers, for work overseas however it was not clear if this was for participation in labour mobility schemes or other international employment opportunities. Regardless, it was generally agreed that people who were confident and had existing skills were probably viewed as more employable by international employers.

> *'It is the ones with technical skills [trade qualifications/skills] that are most prepared… and therefore the first to be recruited. Just this month, I lost my head mechanic and my head driver for heavy equipment. The more experienced ones come across as more travel-ready, more prepared, so the recruiting agencies pick them first.'*

Census data indicate that 52.1 percent of overseas workers[8] are recruited from Shefa province, where formal employment is relatively high (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2022) and the medical and other services required for labour mobility participation (passport applications, police checks etc) are located. Government of Vanuatu plans to decentralise recruitment processes and services may increase participation from rural areas and, in turn, decrease the recruitment of people who already hold formal employment.

The loss of skilled tradespeople was significant when the domestic pool of people with such skills was already small. Hence, several business owners commented on the severe lack of engineers and refrigeration staff. Significantly however, and as discussed above, small domestic pools of skilled labour is a longstanding issue, and one that is merely exacerbated – rather than created by – labour mobility. Consequently, participants agreed there was often a general lack of people with appropriate skills to fill vacant positions. As one employer put it:

> *'It's really difficult because I can tell you I have two positions at the moment to fill and I'm struggling to fulfil them. So, this is real job, full-time job, to work in an office, good environment, I've never experienced that difficulty. Never. So, I would say that we are kind of in a very difficult place as employers.'*

Many employers reported frustration at the short notice employees provided when departing for labour mobility schemes, and some noted that high staff turnover was leading to poorer working conditions. For example, alongside decreased quality of service, one employer from the tourism industry reported that staff turnover had led to a less trusting environment in the

[8] The category 'overseas workers' covers anyone working overseas and is not restricted to labour mobility participants.

workplace, with a higher incidence of theft from registers. Another employer in the construction industry noted that staff turnover meant employers were changing their hiring practices and shifting to shorter term contracts.

> *'Most construction companies are now contracting staff on a daily basis. I do not want to go down that route because temporary jobs do not allow the workers to have decent salaries at the end of the month, and the ones that suffer are the kids because the school fees do not get paid. But the truth is that I now have to consider it.'*

It is likely that such practices, initiated as a response to labour mobility, may lead to further employees leaving for the perceived greener pastures offered by labour mobility schemes.

As well as people with established skill sets leaving Vanuatu, participants observed that new graduates were increasingly participating in labour mobility. A number of participants observed that students were finishing secondary or tertiary studies and rather than working and developing practical skills in Vanuatu's domestic labour market, their preference was to look for employment overseas. Research participants believed that many new graduates lacked practical workplace skills, making it difficult to offer them employment when skilled employees left. If new graduates continue to leave Vanuatu, over the longer-term, this may lead to a further reduction of people with employable skill sets and expertise in fields not related to labour mobility industries of employment.

> *'Their [new graduate's] thinking now is just to travel. So, when they finish [their studies], they travel. Some of them, they come back from the university and they feel like they didn't find a job really fast, just travel. I have a few [relatives] who come back from university, stay for 5, 6 months or 7 months, they didn't find a job, they go to Australia and New Zealand. So, this is something also that just impacts our skills … Some of them, they go to Year 13, they're not thinking about going to university now, they just short-cut. Because they see, they go to Australia and New Zealand, they will make more money, so instead of continuing study … instead of going to USP they just go to Australia and New Zealand.'*

Participants agreed that the main motivation for participating in labour mobility was to earn a higher income as well as to see the world. This is consistent with findings from previous research that highlight the importance of potential earnings in worker's decisions to participate in labour mobility (Petrou & Connell, 2022; World Bank, 2017). Research participants were generally understanding of this desire, acknowledging the high cost of living in Vanuatu, and the potential opportunities offered by labour mobility participation.

> *'I can understand. They are young people, they want to go overseas, and who would not want that? I was like that too. And it's the only opportunity for these young people to go overseas … … it comes back to 'who am I to say you should not do that?'. I think they should probably [do it] because it's a real opportunity to access and see something else, get outside of Vanuatu but it has real impacts on this country and the economy.'*

> *'We've taken the decision to not look at it in a negative light but to support people when they're going because I feel like it's, now that the genie's out of the bottle, there's no putting it back, right? Like labour mobility is something that we just have to deal with so a lot of people I know, a lot of expats and business owners just complain constantly*

> *about labour mobility and how terrible it is. But I think it's a great opportunity for individuals to make some money … I think at that individual level, it's a great opportunity for people.'*

Business coping strategies

Employers took a variety of approaches to try and retain workers. While some employers reported that they did not do anything to try and retain staff, others employed strategies including encouraging open communication about plans, creating lending schemes for employees, encouraging them not to travel and increasing wages. However, most employers felt they could not compete with wages in Australia and several noted that the public sector was able to offer better non-salary benefits as compared to the private sector. Research on women's business leadership in Vanuatu indicates that non-salary benefits such as flexible work arrangements, access to childcare, training and skills development opportunities and mentoring programs can be as important, if not more important than wages to women in the workplaces (PSDI, 2024).

As discussed above, most employers understood the opportunity that labour mobility represented for their employees. At the same time, some felt that their employees sometimes misunderstood how much money they would return home with and after employers discussed this with them, some employees changed their minds about participating. However, it depended on why people wanted to travel as to how successful these approaches were.

> *'I've had people try to resign from the company, like [skilled staff], and say they're going to go pick fruit. And I had to sit them down and say, 'OK, you're actually making more with [my company] than you are [in Australia or New Zealand]' and then once they worked it out, they said 'Oh yeah'. And then we've also had people resign, they said 'We know we're going to make less money, but we just want to travel, we just want to go to Australia and eat McDonalds. We want to see Australia.' So I said 'Well, OK in that case I cannot, I can't compete with that, so go and pick some fruit and when you come back you can come back and work [with us]' … I can't compete with that. You wanna go have that experience, travel, eat McDonalds, pick some fruit. But I have worked it out with a few people that they just didn't quite work it out that they were earning more with us … I think it's a bit confusing for some people about how much you're actually going to earn and you earn a lot, but then you have deductions, and then what do you walk home with? So I always [ask] what did your friend, when he came home after 6 or 7 months, what did he have in his hand? Cause then we need to divide that by 7 and say that's your net earning per month. Then we can look at it and compare with what you're making here.'*

Some employers were happy to re-employ workers on their return to Vanuatu, however their attitudes to doing so, and whether they felt workers had gained skills while overseas, were mixed. Employers reported that they were happy to invite former employees back if they departed 'properly', that is, if they had provided notice and communicated their intentions with employers.

> *'What we've done with staff is tell them that if they leave properly, like most of the time they're going to have an opportunity if they come back or in-between jobs, in-between overseas work they will come back and work for the company.'*

Several employers, particularly in the retail and tourism sectors, described arrangements such as this where their employees undertook multiple labour mobility contracts and worked for them whenever they returned to Vanuatu. These employers were the most likely to believe labour mobility was leading to useful skills gains. This belief was likely due to a combination of factors including the attitudes of individual employers and the alignment of skills learned overseas with certain industries. For example, and as in the case below, some tourism industry employers felt exposure to life in Australia or New Zealand helped employees improve their understanding of the expat market in a way that those who had never left Vanuatu could not:

> *'We've lost definitely some staff but in the meantime I have the feeling that it's also benefitting us and some of the staff, like I've seen also staff going and coming back with a much better sort of training. Like talking about mostly women, I've had women staff going to Australia who had never been overseas before. When they come back, they've got a much better kind of opening on the world, they understand the, like in the tourism industry they understand the expat market … They talk better English they have all of those things that have improved a lot and I think in fact it's now benefitting us having those staff coming back … we've had staff who have left for six or seven months, coming back staying two or three months. So we re-employ them and when they leave we let them go again and then next time they'll come back and I think at some stage they will come back for good and then they'll be good staff in the future. So I think it's all, somewhere benefitting [us], although for a few more years I think it's going to be affecting our resources locally.'*

By contrast, one employer stated that he preferred not to re-hire employees who had participated in labour mobility if they did not provide proper notice and/or communicate their intentions beforehand. Nonetheless, and due to a lack of others with suitable skills, he felt he no longer had a choice but to re-employ these people when they returned to Vanuatu.

While some employers felt that labour mobility would, in the long term, lead to improved skills, others felt that skills learned through labour mobility were not relevant to their industry. Research has generally emphasised the development of soft skills, such as time management and English language, as a result of labour mobility participation (Petrou & Connell, 2022; World Bank, 2017). However, research participants expressed mixed feelings about whether labour mobility resulted in the development of new skills that could be usefully employed at home. Using the example of a former employee who had participated in labour mobility and, among other things, established his own small business upon return, one employer suggested that while labour mobility participants were not learning skills that were relevant to his business, they were probably benefitting as individuals. As in the case above, a few employers from the tourism industry felt that labour mobility participants could benefit from exposure to a different culture and the improvement of language and other skills. Nonetheless, some employers felt that people did not learn any useful skills while in Australia or New Zealand. This was most common for employers whose businesses did not align with skill sets commonly used in horticulture and related industries. For example, one employer whose business involved mostly office-based work observed:

'But I would have to be conscious that the skill they would have developed over there is nothing to do with what we do in this company. So, for this reason I'm not sure if I will take that person back, I don't know, it would depend on the case.'

When they could not fill skilled positions locally, some employers imported workers from elsewhere. As one participant observed, in some cases there simply were no locals with the required skill sets available.

'When we ask the government if we can import skilled labours, if we could get engineers and mechanics in, the government says no go get one from Maritime College. We went there and there was none.'

It was not clear whether employers were using the Emergency Employment Visa to import labour, however participants had mixed views on the utility of this visa. While some participants had used the visa, or knew of others who had, others felt the validity period of 12 months was too short, and instead preferred to rely on traditional Work Permits that had a longer validity. While importing labour filled the gap in the short-term, over the longer-term employers were hopeful that the pool of skilled labour in Vanuatu would grow and they would be able to employ locals.

'If everybody goes, we need to bring people. So, Filipinos, Indonesians, skilled labour from Asia probably would be the temporary fix to fill the gap that we have today. And then we need to be looking at how we can drive young people into [the industries we need]. We need to do something for the short-term shortage, and we need to look at how we address the medium and long-term shortage in labour mobility. [Foreign workers are] more expensive, it's not what I want to be doing, I'd prefer to be local as much as possible. But I can see the writing on the wall is, that's going to be the next five years is that we're going to have to bring in some of that top level engineering experience because we just don't have it here in the country.'

In sum, and despite their much lower labour mobility participation rates, employers' coping strategies did not challenge the status quo around gendered employment norms. The next sections consider why this was the case, and what would need to be done to increase women's private sector employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Women's opportunities for employment

Men's participation in labour mobility did not appear to be creating opportunities for women's employment in the private sector. While most employers were open to hiring women, and many in the tourism industry already employed predominantly women in both managerial and lower skilled roles, there was no evidence that the large-scale participation of men in labour mobility had any influence on this. Gender norms meant that some employers in industries such as construction that are traditionally perceived as 'men's work', were reluctant to hire women because they believed women were not suited to these roles. However, even where employers were open to employing women in non-traditional roles, a lack of female applicants and/or lack of skills and work experience meant they were not hired. For example, one employer from the construction industry reported that while female applicants tended to be better qualified than men, they had no practical knowledge of the sector and so could not assist customers as required. As a result, he tended not to hire women. By and large, limited pools of skilled workers meant that employers hired whoever had the required skill set for the job. One employer observed that '*I would employ anyone that has qualifications… but sadly the women have even less [qualifications] in this field'*. Skills were thus often the primary concern when it came to filling vacant positions. Significantly however, gender norms meant women often did not have opportunities to obtain skills or qualifications in non-traditional areas, and so certain jobs went to men by default.

Nonetheless, some participants observed that women in rural areas appeared to be taking on more responsibilities due to the lack of men in some villages. This is consistent with previous research on labour mobility impacts in Vanuatu and elsewhere across the Pacific (Bedford et al., 2020; World Bank, 2018). One key informant noted that:

> *'In the villages now, the women are taking up the men's role now. […] The men are leaving and only women are there so any activities in the villages or any decision making in the village, only women are there now. […] Women have to do the gardening, women have to look after the kids. I mean do everything, do the men and women's role. This is something also happening now in the villages now. Because if you go there, only old people are left. All the young people, they travel. So the village is full of women and kids and they're doing all the roles now.'*

Similarly, several participants who were involved in buying or processing copra noted that women were increasingly involved in copra production due to the absence of male labour.

> *'Women are now cutting copra especially up north. Women from Gaua. They are cutting copra because men have left for labour mobility or seasonal work.'*

It is possible that labour mobility is having a greater impact on gender norms in the rural private sector than that in urban areas, however more research is needed to explore this.

Women's opportunity for entrepreneurship

Significantly, labour mobility participation did appear to be enabling women's entrepreneurship. Previous research has highlighted the use of earnings and remittances from labour mobility for small business establishment. In general, men are more likely to invest in businesses and productive assets, with women more likely to invest in family goals such as paying school fees (Doan et al., 2023; World Bank, 2023). Nonetheless, one key informant noted that whereas men want to return from labour mobility with savings, they are more often driven by the desire for experience. By contrast, women tended to return to Vanuatu with the desire to start small businesses. This participant reported that women were increasingly approaching organisations such as the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) to build on their business ideas and plan for their goals before they travel. Research on access to finance for women-owned businesses across six provinces in Vanuatu has also shown that savings from friends or family participating in labour mobility schemes was the second most common source of start-up capital after their own savings (Voigt-Graf 2023). This suggests that women's entrepreneurship can be supported by labour mobility, even for those who are not direct participants in the schemes. Examples of women who have invested in small businesses after they or their family members participated in labour mobility are presented in Box 1.

This focus on small businesses is potentially the result of economic reintegration strategies, which in Vanuatu and elsewhere tend to encourage entrepreneurship and small business establishment. For example, located in Port Vila, V-Lab runs small business incubator courses for returned labour mobility participants. It is therefore possible that, reflecting local initiatives and policy, labour mobility participants are more likely to invest in small businesses than to return to formal employment. At the same time, the establishment of small businesses may reflect a lack of appropriate formal sector opportunities for returned workers and/or better remuneration. Research from Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands indicates that workers in the informal economy can often earn far more than those employed in the formal economy (PSDI, 2023, p.12). More research is needed to explore this.

Several participants noted that while men had dominated participation to date, women were increasingly participating in labour mobility too. As noted above, new pathways that focus on women's labour mobility participation, such as the Aged Care Expansion program, have recently been established. It is likely that this, along with ongoing work to meet targets will continue to increase women's participation in labour mobility. One key informant observed that

> *'There might be a perception that women are less likely to go, especially if they have a young family. But we're hearing more and more, it's more the provincially based smaller businesses where women, because they have that better community network or family network, there's more women going now.'*

If this is the case, there may be greater opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the future, especially in the care sector as the need for formal care outside the home for children, the elderly and disabled people grows.

Box 1. Labour mobility and women's entrepreneurship

Janet

Between 2014 and 2022 Janet participated in the RSE scheme roughly eight times. After building a house and investing in other infrastructure (e.g. water tanks) with earnings from her earlier contracts, Janet purchased a truck and some land. Janet was able to pay for 80 percent of the truck with her savings, and took a loan to cover the remaining 20 percent. Applying for a loan was difficult as Janet had low literacy skills, and her sister-in-law helped by completing the paperwork for her. While Janet was in New Zealand, Janet's sister-in-law looked after the transport business Janet had established with her truck. However, when Janet returned home, she found the business had not been profitable. She took the keys back from her sister-in-law and decided to the manage the business herself. Janet undertook a training course at VCCI on business operations and financial literacy. While Janet's business is quite small - she employs one driver - she has noticed many benefits and opportunities generated for women who begin businesses such as hers. If managed well, Janet believes small businesses can be a gateway to financial independence.

Elsa

In 2012, Elsa's family decided to purchase the property they had been renting. To earn money for a deposit, her husband, Silas, decided to participate in the RSE scheme. Silas earned enough to cover the deposit within the first few months of his contract. He then undertook another three labour mobility contracts and they were able to purchase another plot of land and build a house. Elsa had noticed the lack of stores in their area. Those that existed had limited stock or kept irregular hours. Elsa decided to purchase some goods for sale and began operating a small store from her house that operated regular hours and focused on good customer service. As time went on, Elsa created a dedicated retail space for her shop. Elsa has noticed that while women have traditionally been reluctant to involve themselves in household finances, their confidence grows as they see others embarking on entrepreneurial endeavours, regardless of scale. As income from these ventures emerges, women's desire to sustain and expand their businesses intensifies. Elsa has observed an increasing number of women engaging in small-scale food vending (20vt mamas) or sewing enterprises. Nevertheless, many face challenges accessing the necessary finances to develop their businesses further. For Elsa, her husband's participation in the RSE provided access to the necessary capital for establishing her small business.

Barriers to women's employment

Participants identified a number of barriers to women's private sector employment including:

A lack of appropriate skills for particular jobs or industries. Many employers reported that their priority is matching job vacancies to skills. This extended to traditional and non-traditional roles for women. Women were less likely to have technical or trades skills in industries such as construction or refrigeration making them automatically ineligible for certain roles.

Cultural norms around 'appropriate' work for women. While many employers were open to employing women, a few employers reported that they were not comfortable hiring women in male dominated industries such as construction. For example, one business owner cited concerns over women feeling uncomfortable in male dominated environments due to the coarse language men use, and how women might be treated by male colleagues. Another employer reported that cultural norms prevented them from promoting women to managerial positions as men traditionally act as leaders. This employer stated that men did not want to be given orders by women, while women did not feel comfortable giving instructions to their male colleagues.

> *'On our weekly roster, we put two shifts where our female sous chef occupied the chef position. But they [the employees] changed the rooster themselves so that the women did not become chefs. Women can't be seen at a higher level than men.'*

Many participants reported that women had a lack of interest in applying for or working in certain roles or male-dominated industries, perhaps influenced by concerns over potential harassment by male colleagues as outlined above.

Domestic responsibilities such as childcare and housework. Related to gender and cultural norms, women are generally the ones who took on responsibility for childcare and other domestic duties with women typically performing 80 % of unpaid work in the Asia-Pacific region (ESCAP, 2019). This was reinforced by labour laws that provide 12 weeks of maternity leave for mothers but only 10 days of paternity leave for fathers. Women were often not supported to enter the workforce either through policy or by other household members who expected them to act as primary carers. Employer or government provided childcare is virtually non-existent in Vanuatu, requiring households to make their own arrangements, usually relying on mothers or other women relatives to fulfil this role.

Lack of gender inclusive labour legislation. Substantial legal, regulatory and policy barriers persist for women including gaps in legislated non-discrimination in employment and a lack of protections against workplace harassment that prevent more women from entering and remaining in the workforce (PSDI, 2024a). Much of Vanuatu's labour legislation does not provide adequate legal protections for women such as the prohibition of discrimination and harassment in employment and dismissal of pregnant workers nor does it guarantee their equal treatment such as equal pay legislation (PSDI, 2024b).

Lack of infrastructure and safety concerns for women employees. Several participants noted that in some instances, businesses did not have appropriate infrastructure for women employees, such as separate showers, toilets and space for breastfeeding. Others suggested that the provision of space for childcare within businesses or through government supported centres could enable women to enter the workforce. Concerns about safety could also prevent women from applying for certain jobs. These ranged from concerns about workplace harassment in male dominated industries, to lack of transport to travel to and from work if shifts fell outside of business hours.

The prevalence of domestic violence can prevent women from joining the workforce and result in high rates of absenteeism from work. A number of participants noted that domestic violence remains a big issue in Vanuatu, and it is not uncommon for women to take time off work to recover after experiencing violence. One employer observed that a staff member had lost hearing in one ear after she was attacked by her partner. Studies on the financial impact of domestic violence for businesses is significant, in PNG this equated to approximately ten days in lost time and approximately AUD2.85 million in cost to business (Kennedy and Hameed, 2021). Similarly, domestic violence may prevent women from entering the workforce altogether if their partner restricts this.

Barriers to women's entrepreneurship

Alongside barriers to entering the workforce as employees, participants identified barriers to women starting their own businesses as entrepreneurs. As noted above, entrepreneurship was not a focus of this research, however it was discussed by several participants. More research is needed on this topic, however tentative findings from this research are largely consistent with barriers to entrepreneurship reported elsewhere (Voigt-Graf, 2023).

Women can find it challenging to raise enough capital to establish a business. Research shows that access to finance is the main challenge for women who want to begin a small business. Many women are unaware of different sources of capital, and consequently rely on their own savings. In addition, women are often hesitant to take out loans (both formal and informal) due to concerns about interest and repayments (Voigt-Graf, 2023). Participants in this research noted that in many households, men control the finances and women must convince their husbands or partners that they should use the money to start a business. Furthermore, and with the current high cost of living, women are finding they have less disposable income to invest in starting small businesses.

Many women establish business that are similar in nature, leading to increased competition. Participants observed that when small businesses offer similar products and services, it becomes difficult to distinguish oneself from the competition. One participant noted that women sometimes felt they needed to offer goods or services at lower prices to 'beat' the competition, however this could lead to smaller overall profits.

Jealousy and peer pressure can hinder the establishment and running of small businesses by women. Within communities, unequal access to economic opportunities (real and perceived) can lead to feelings of jealousy (Taylor, 2015). Successful businesses can thus be the target of jealousy from other community members. One participant observed that competition and jealousy between women can seem harsher than it is between men, and can discourage women from establishing businesses and/or impact their success.

For those who have established a small business already, increases to the cost of raw materials mean it is difficult for women to make a profit through small business activities. Research participants noted that increasing costs of raw materials and produce have made it harder for women's businesses to make a profit.

Women's inexperience in handling finances presents ongoing challenges to running small businesses. Women may have low levels of financial literacy, and access to training can be difficult due to competing commitments and insufficient time; a lack of information about available training; and, lack of access to training, particularly in rural areas (Voigt-Graf, 2023). Participants in this study observed that many women feel they do not have experience in handling finances, which presents challenges when trying to manage a small business.

Recommendations

High rates of labour mobility participation following the COVID-19 pandemic have begun to impact Vanuatu's domestic labour supply (Orozco & Spencer, 2023). However, while men have dominated labour mobility participation, their departure from the domestic labour market does not appear to be creating private sector employment opportunities for women. Encouraging women to take up training and skills development, and to move into private sector employment could provide one avenue for addressing current labour shortages and skills gaps. Significantly, this approach aligns closely with a range of Government policies and objectives, including those in *Vanuatu 2030: The People's Plan* (Government of Vanuatu, 2021) and the *National Gender Equality Policy 2020-2030* (Department of Women's Affairs, 2021), which aim to improve and expand women's employment opportunities and skills development. The following recommendations draw on research findings and the views of key stakeholders to outline short and mid to long-term strategies to remove barriers to women's increased participation in the private sector as a potential solution to labour shortages.

Short-term

Incorporate research findings on women and labour mobility into Vanuatu's first national action plan on women's economic empowerment. (Government – Dept of Labour and Department of Women's Affairs)

Ensure that all research (including census questions) to gather data on the impacts of labour mobility and migration on the workforce is sex-disaggregated data and that gender analysis is routinely undertaken in the development of policy responses. (Government – Dept of Labour, VBOS, DWA)

Conduct analysis/review of women in vocational education and non-traditional employment to identify strategies to increase women's participation. (Government – DL, Education, DWA and development partners)

Support for businesses to provide mentoring and internships for potential employees. Several participants commented on the success of the recent internship program run by the Department of Labour (DoL), Youth Challenge Vanuatu (YCV) and Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT) (Box 2). Internships not only provide practical skills to interns, but also take the pressure off businesses to invest money in training interns who may wish to participate in labour mobility rather than continue in domestic employment. A focus on internships that bring women into the labour force could increase their participation in private sector employment. It was also suggested that the government could streamline processes for bringing in mentors from overseas to provide training within businesses and at vocational schools.

Box 2. Hospitality and Tourism Internship Program

In September 2023, the Department of Labour (DoL), Youth Challenge Vanuatu (YCV) and Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT) established the 'Ready for Work' hospitality and tourism internship program to provide youth with training and work experience in the industry. The program responded to opportunities for employment in hospitality and tourism sectors through labour mobility as well as the domestic need for more skilled hospitality and tourism workers.

The first cohort of thirty interns began their training in November 2023 and graduated in March 2024. Participants undertook a two-week course in tourism followed by work placements at local resorts such as Iririki Island and Moorings Hotel. During their work placement, youth received an allowance to cover bus travel to and from work. At least six participants went on to secure jobs at the businesses where they undertook work placements.

The program was warmly received by participating businesses. Anita Ambong, the general manager of Moorings hotel explained: '*We have a shortage of staff and need to fill the gap. The interns have blended in well, allowing us to cover shifts where there is no one available … The program is excellent, and if youths find it hard to get a job, the YCV and DoL program is a good channel they can follow, especially in the tourism industry; this is where they can thrive.'* (quoted in Toara, 2024).

Create women-friendly workplaces. (Businesses, Industry Associations)

Without a safe working environment, or a safe environment to get to and from work, women will continue to be reluctant to join the workforce. Businesses can implement strategies to attract and retain women in the workplace including addressing safety concerns. These can be low-cost options such as developing workplace equality and harassment policies and conducting training with employees on the benefits of a diverse workforce, flexible work arrangements such as work from home, compressed hours and job sharing (where possible) through to investments in workplace facilities (e.g. separate bathroom facilities for men and women and breastfeeding rooms), on-site or subsidised childcare and transport to/from work and/or school pick up. Showcasing and sharing experience across businesses on the benefits of putting in place policies and strategies to create more women-friendly workplaces can further expand the roll-out across sectors/industries.

Incentives for hiring women. (Businesses, Industry Associations and Govt – Department of Women/Department of Labour) Linked to the recommendation above, providing incentives for hiring women into particular roles or industries may increase their uptake/participation. This could include encouraging women back into the workforce after having children, particularly those with skills, experience and qualifications. This could include setting voluntary quotas for women in non-traditional roles or the development of return to work or job readiness programs for women developed in partnership with government.

Private sector support for victims of domestic and family violence. (Businesses, Industry Associations, Women's Business Networks, Govt (DWA), Vanuatu Women's Centre and development partners) Research into domestic violence and the workplace in Fiji (International Finance Corporation, 2019) and PNG (International Finance Corporation, 2021) found that effective workplace responses to domestic violence, such as the availability of staff trained to support colleagues experiencing violence, and collaborating with external support services, could improve workplace productivity and community attitudes towards violence. Supporting Vanuatu's private sector to adopt similar practices may lead to comparable outcomes.

Medium to long-term

Large scale awareness and promotion of women's opportunities in non-traditional and leadership roles to promote attitudinal change/gender norm changes. Women's workforce participation is determined by a range of factors including cultural attitudes towards appropriate or acceptable occupations for women. Current efforts to highlight and promote the opportunities and contributions of women in non-traditional occupations including media profiles and campaigns should be continued and augmented with targeted outreach to community leaders and other influential leaders to understand and address community concerns regarding women's participation in specific sectors and roles, particularly those relating to safety concerns.

Increase access to and improve the quality of education and training for women. Participants felt that the standard of graduates was often quite low, and many lacked essential work ready skills. Furthermore, the availability of technical skills training within Vanuatu was lower than in the past. It was suggested that decentralisation of training facilities would provide opportunities for more people to access technical training. Setting gender quotas for certain courses and providing incentives for women to take up training places may help facilitate their movement into non-traditional roles. Another option could be to provide women only training courses on particular subjects/skills.

Access to affordable childcare. Childcare responsibilities can be a significant barrier to women entering the workforce. Providing access to affordable childcare may open up workforce opportunities for women. This could be done by creating incentives for businesses to provide on-site facilities (e.g. Vanuatu Institute of Technology on-site childcare centre), or through government childcare centres.

Review labour laws to promote non-discrimination and increase protections and incentives for women including provisions for maternity and paternity leave. Most Pacific countries don't have legislated equal rights for women in employment including non-discrimination and equal pay nor do they have protections in place to prevent workplace sexual harassment. A review of current labour legislation to identify and address discriminatory provisions and increase protections and equality for women has significant potential to increase women's participation in the formal workforce. Over time, this can contribute to expanding the labour market through the creation of more gender-inclusive employment conditions for women.

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