



Women producers of Kiribati and their participation in inter-island and international trade





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report investigates the income-generating economic activities of women producers and traders in Kiribati and the constraints they face while participating in production and trade activities. To this end, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) carried out both desk research and a field study in the four islands of South Tarawa and Kiritimati as urban areas, and Arorae and Makin as rural areas.

Kiribati's fragmented geographic structure and limited connectivity, narrow range of resources, high dependence on imports, and lack of economies scale – all of which are common to most small island developing states – create challenges for the expansion of the private sector and inter-island and international trade. Remoteness results in slower penetration of modern technologies and poses challenges for imports of raw materials and intermediate goods unavailable domestically. Weak business infrastructure, limited access to finance and burdensome licensing and trade procedures imply additional costs, further inhibiting the development of the private sector.

The economy of Kiribati is characterized by the dualism of urban and rural areas. While urban areas are home to public sector and most formal private sector jobs (with South Tarawa being the main urban centre), the rural sector is characterized by subsistence-based and informal economic activities. As a least developed country, Kiribati also faces high levels of poverty and inequality, more severely felt in remote islands and among female-headed households. Health and education are among the major success areas in terms of gender equality. However, gender-based physical and sexual violence remains an important issue despite some positive changes achieved over time. Women's participation in decision-making lags behind, especially in upper-level entities. Women also have a lower rate of labour force participation and a higher unemployment rate, and are segregated into informal activities to a greater extent than men.

The government of Kiribati introduced various national policy instruments on gender equality and is a signatory to a number of regional and international initiatives. The National Gender Equality and Development Policy Framework, which was introduced in March 2019, is an important step in this regard. Kiribati's 20-Year Vision 2016–2036 (KV20) also shifts the focus on gender-based violence in the earlier policy instruments to gender mainstreaming across all policies, budgets and programmes of the government.

Agriculture (mainly copra growing) and fisheries are the two major economic activities in Kiribati. As a reflection of the economic structure, fish, crude coconut and unprocessed copra, in order of importance, are Kiribati's major export products. Like other small island developing states, the country imports most consumption and capital goods. The introduction of the Vessel Day Scheme (VDS) in 2012 and the launch of the Kiribati Fish Limited (KFL) in 2013–2014 was a turning point in this regard, substantially increasing the share of fisheries in economic activity and government revenues. Kiribati had the highest tuna catch among the small island developing states in the Pacific. The increase in fish licence revenue, in part, enabled the doubling of the copra subsidy in 2016. The government considers the development of fisheries as a priority area together with tourism in its Development Plan and KV20 to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The coconut sector is considered as complementary due to its links to tourism and other sectors of the economy.

There is a clear gender segregation of employment across sectors in Kiribati. Women are overrepresented in manufacturing (e.g. cigarette making, handicrafts, garments) and services such as wholesale and retail trade, education and public administration. Men are mainly employed in agriculture (e.g. copra) and fishing, and in services such as public administration, wholesale and retail trade, and rental and businesses sectors.

Women producers, who were covered in the UNCTAD survey, carry out mostly traditional economic activities such as the production of handicrafts, garments, coconut-based products, smoked fish, and cigarette from pandanus leaves in both rural and urban areas. In urban areas, women also sell cooked food in response to the growing demand by government offices and schools, and process semi-finished products that are supplied from outer islands. In the supply of cooked food, there are also networks of workers besides women residing in urban areas. These networks include workers from outer islands who are either temporarily in Tarawa or send supply from outer islands.

Women producers engage in both inter-island and international trade. While rural producers mostly engage in inter-island trade, urban producers are more likely to participate in international trade. Women rural producers mostly sell traditional goods such as agricultural products and handicrafts to urban areas through family/

friends, registered agents and church outlets. Some of the urban producers export virgin coconut oil, smoked fish and mauri blouses mainly through family abroad and through the help of international development organizations, though in small quantities.

Women producers and traders in Kiribati face the following set of supply-side constraints that limit their capacity to participate in inter-island and international trade as identified by the UNCTAD survey:

- **Time poverty:** Women's primary role as providers of unpaid domestic and care work reduces the time available for income-generating economic activities. Women's active participation in church- and community-related activities (e.g. fundraising) further intensifies their time poverty. The UNCTAD survey, however, shows that there is a positive change in the attitudes towards women's income-generating activities within households, and this translates into a more balanced gender division of unpaid work compared to the past.
- **Social issues:** Women express lack of self-esteem as one of the impediments to carrying out income-generating activities. Women's groups at the village/community or church level help mitigate this problem and empower women.
- **Access to finance:** Lack of collateral (mainly land) is a major barrier for producers' and traders' ability to apply for bank loans. This is valid for both men and women on islands where the state is the main owner of land, and is intensified further for women due to gender inequality in land ownership on islands where private ownership is allowed. Lengthy and complicated application procedures, sectoral targets of certain loan programmes (e.g. the Development Bank of Kiribati's Rural Loan Support scheme) also prevent many women producers from applying for loans. Village bank loans have been successful on some of the islands but their management has not been effective on others.
- **Access to inputs:** Securing supplies of raw materials and goods is an important problem in both rural and urban areas mainly due to transportation issues among islands. Receiving imported inputs, which is mostly done through brokers, is an even bigger challenge due to lengthy procedures and time-consuming clearance processes at the border.
- **Access to infrastructure:** Access to electricity is not cited as an issue by women producers thanks to widespread use of solar energy. However, air

and sea transportation is far from meeting the needs of producers and traders. Storage space is also an issue, resulting in a lack of stock of products for immediate sale or trade in large volumes. Women producers, many of whom work home-based, cite lack of business space as a major constraint. Internet access is relatively new in remote areas and its incidence is quite low, making electronic solutions to business and trade like e-commerce not easily reachable.

- **Access to modern technologies:** Most of the women producers interviewed by UNCTAD in rural and urban areas use traditional production technologies. The high cost of modern technologies, and difficulties with their use, maintenance and repair, are major inhibiting factors preventing producers from adopting them. Women associations play an important role in facilitating access to technology through procurement and sharing of modern tools and equipment for their members.
- **Access to training and skill development:** Training and skill development are cited as among the most pressing supply-side constraints that women producers and traders face in Kiribati. This is especially the case for rural producers and for informal producers in urban areas. Even though formal, established businesses (e.g. garment producers) have accumulated knowledge on business management, they need to update themselves on new developments as well. Government training programmes are available but not on a regular basis, and are not being delivered very effectively.

The subsistence economy plays a major role in supporting livelihoods in Kiribati. Inter-island trade in local products is critical to both increase income-generating activities and support nutrition and other dimensions of wellbeing in Kiribati's society. It is important to not undermine the subsistence economy while developing policies to support inter-island and international trade, and to make the transition from subsistence to income-generating production smoother. Given the much lower barriers to inter-island trade for women producers, and given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, investing in the development of inter-island trade may yield more immediate change compared to international trade. Therefore, the government may wish to follow a more balanced approach while developing trade-conducive policies. Based on the findings of the field study and desk research, the policy recommendations section presents a set of alternative policies that could help address these various constraints.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kiribati is a low-income, small island developing state (SIDS) and one of the most remote and geographically dispersed countries in the world. Kiribati's highly dispersed population, remoteness to major markets, and narrow economic base, along with its dual economic structure with sparse, outer island communities on the one hand and a heavily crowded capital on the other, create challenges for the economy and for the country's ability to create integrated industrial value chains. Therefore, Kiribati has a very low level of economic diversity, and production is mostly focused on local products, with most consumption and capital goods being imported from abroad, as is typical for a SIDS.

The geography of the country is not conducive to efficient delivery of public services and infrastructure, and this negatively affects private sector development. Kiribati is also one of the countries most affected by climate change (UNCTAD, 2019a). Formal employment opportunities are very limited outside the public sector. Therefore, households mostly rely on informal and subsistence-based economic activities such as fishing, copra, other agriculture, and handicrafts production as a means to generate income (AusAid, 2018). Women further face gendered supply-side constraints, in addition to the structural constraints common to all SIDS, limiting the opportunities for their participation in the economy.

This report presents an analysis of income-generating activities of women producers in Kiribati and their involvement in inter-island and international trade. It aims to identify possible ways to support women's successful participation in production and trade. Women's income-generating activities are assessed within the broader framework of gender inequalities

and women's economic empowerment issues in Kiribati. Women's economic activities play an important role in sustaining livelihoods for both urban and rural households. The study is based on both desk research and findings from a survey carried out by UNCTAD in Kiribati. The UNCTAD survey aimed to identify (i) the main income-earning activities of women in urban and rural areas; (ii) the obstacles that hinder women's participation in both inter-island and international trade, and (iii) the strategies that women producers and traders see as viable for overcoming these obstacles. The survey was carried out on four islands of Kiribati – South Tarawa, Kiritimati (or Christmas Island), Makin and Arorae – during the first half of 2019. For the purpose of the survey, South Tarawa and Kiritimati were labelled as urban areas, and Makin together with Arorae as rural areas. Further details about the survey are available in Annex I.

The report is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a brief background on the geographic structure and development indicators of Kiribati. Section 3 presents an overview of Kiribati's economic and trade profiles. Section 4 introduces the legal and institutional frameworks to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment in Kiribati. Against this backdrop, section 5 first presents an overview of gender inequalities in different domains of economic and social life. It then presents an analysis of women's participation in the labour market and women's main income-generating activities in urban and rural areas based on the findings of the UNCTAD survey. Section 6 provides a review of the main challenges faced by women producers while participating in inter-island and international trade as identified through the UNCTAD survey. Section 7 presents policy recommendations based on the findings of the study.

2. BACKGROUND CONTEXT

2.1. GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Republic of Kiribati is a SIDS with a population of 110,136 in 2015.¹ It is one of the smallest countries in the world, with a land area of 726 square kilometres (KNSO, 2016).² It shares the economic challenges common to most small island developing states, which, due to their small economies and narrow resource base, face limited scope for exploitation of economies of scale and a narrow range of crops, minerals, and manufactures. Their geographic remoteness also leads to high transportation costs for trade and market access. All of these challenges result in limited export and employment opportunities, high import dependence, and high outward migration, especially of skilled labour (UNCTAD, 2014).

The population of Kiribati spreads across 24 islands,³ 21 of which are outer islands or rural areas, and 3.5 million square kilometres of territorial sea. The country is comprised of three principal island groups – the Gilbert Islands, the Phoenix Islands and the Line Islands – located on both sides of the equator (figure 1). Most of the islands are situated in the dry belt of the equatorial oceanic climate zone, which experiences frequent prolonged droughts. The alkaline coral composition and high porosity of soil in this climate zone make it one of the poorest quality soils for agriculture in the world. Unlike the terrestrial fauna, the marine fauna is highly diverse, rich and productive. Lagoon and coastal fisheries currently provide sufficient protein for most I-Kiribati⁴, although overfishing, population pressure, climate change and increases in global food prices all create challenges for long-term food security (Government of Kiribati, 2013). Unregulated commercial development also adversely affects coastal fisheries and marine stocks. Moreover, the low-lying character of atolls makes Kiribati extremely exposed to risks related to climate change and resulting effects such as extreme weather conditions and rising sea levels, threatening agricultural production and livelihoods (Otiuea et al., 2019). The government of Kiribati introduced the Kiribati Joint

Implementation Plan for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management 2014–2023 (KJIP), which also recognizes the need to support equal participation of men and women in climate change initiatives (Government of Kiribati, 2019).

The Gilbert Islands are home to 90 per cent of the population and include both rural and densely populated urban territories. While the average population density for Kiribati is 152 inhabitants per square kilometre, this figure increases to 2,772 on South Tarawa island and further skyrockets to 10,377 on the heavily urbanized Betio islet, located to the extreme southwest of the capital atoll of South Tarawa (KNSO, 2016). Owing to high population density, land is scarce and expensive. Arorae is the southernmost atoll of the Gilbert Islands. It is known for maintaining a traditional decision-making system. Makin is the northernmost of the Gilbert Islands. Thanks to its wet climate and richer soils, Makin is a major producer of fruits such as banana and papaya, which are delivered to South Tarawa markets. Makin and other Northern Gilberts do not have the tradition of councils of elders.

The Phoenix Islands are a group of scarcely inhabited low-lying atolls and reef islands situated 1,480 km east of the Gilbert Islands. The only inhabited atoll in the Phoenix Islands group is Kanton, where 20 persons lived in 2015 (KNSO, 2016).

The Line Islands is an island group located further to the east. Its economic hub, Kiritimati, which is the world's largest atoll with a land area of 388 square kilometres, accounts for around half of Kiribati's land area, though only for about 6 per cent of its population (KNSO, 2016). Kiritimati serves as a commercial hub for the Line and Phoenix Islands, and its population is the third largest after South and North Tarawa. Most land on the island is owned by the government, which issues licenses for land use. However, in contrast to South Tarawa, Kiritimati is rich in natural resources, and families require less income for their basic food needs (AusAid, 2018). An important and growing proportion of local income is generated by the tourism sector,

¹ There were 17,772 households.

² The latest population and housing census was carried out in 2015.

³ The total land area includes 32 coral atolls and one island (Banaba).

⁴ The people of Kiribati are known as I-Kiribati.

fed by the increasing number of international tourists attracted above all by game fishing opportunities.⁵

South Tarawa and Kiritimati represent urban areas,⁶ and Arorae and Makin – which both belong to the Gilbert Islands group – represent predominantly rural outer islands in this study.

2.2. SOCIOECONOMIC STRUCTURE

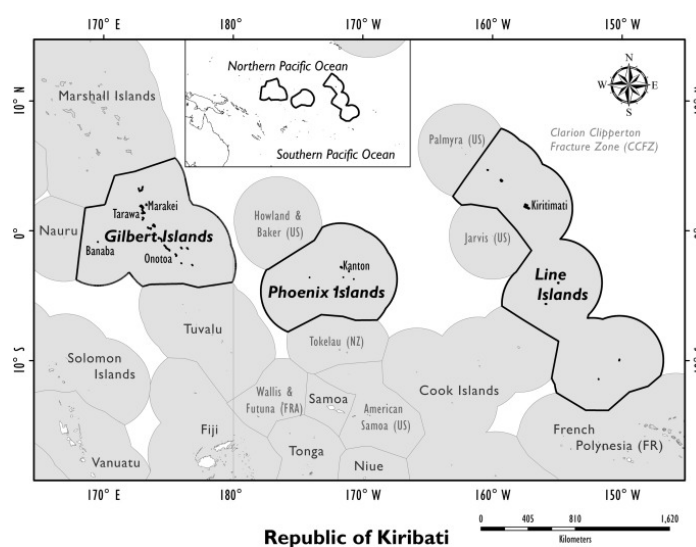
South Tarawa is the main economic centre of Kiribati and is home to close to half the total population (55,000 people). Most public authorities are located there and the government is a major employer. The private sector, although relatively small in size, has been quickly developing. An increasing number of people migrate to South Tarawa for employment opportunities, education and health services. This leads to environmental challenges, and the pressure on providing water, energy, housing and other necessities puts stress on the island's ecosystems, public infrastructure and finances. Limited availability of arable land also makes urban areas highly

dependent on produce from rural islands and imported food (Government of Kiribati, 2020).

On the outer islands of Kiribati, main economic activities are linked to the subsistence economy, and employment opportunities are limited to fisheries, tourism, and agriculture. Island Councils, the main governing body of the outer islands, are the main employers on outer islands. Many islands have limited access to electricity, water and sanitation services. The effects of climate change are also more severely felt on the outer islands due to their remoteness and limited natural and economic resource base (Government of Kiribati, 2020).

Kiribati is in the group of least developed countries (LDCs) and has a GDP per capita of US\$1,655, much lower than the average of US\$4,193 for Pacific island small states, measured at current prices in 2019.⁷ Kiribati belongs to the group of medium countries in terms of human development, ranking 132nd among 189 countries according to the United Nations Development Programme's 2018 Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP, 2019).⁸

Figure 1. Map of Kiribati



Source: Mallin (2018).

⁵ Kiritimati is one of three islands featured on the website of the Kiribati National Tourism Office: <http://www.kiribatitourism.gov.ki/islands-to-explore/kiritimati/>

⁶ Traditionally, South Tarawa is the only island understood as an urban area.

⁷ GDP per capita figures are from the World Bank's World Development Indicators database, available at <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/> (accessed on 9 November 2020).

⁸ The HDI is a composite measure of development that is composed of the dimensions of health, knowledge, and living standards. The health dimension is measured by life expectancy at birth; the education dimension is measured by expected years of schooling and mean years of schooling; and living standards are measured by gross national income per capita. The HDI is calculated as the geometric mean of these three sub-indices.

The poverty rate in Kiribati was 22 per cent based on the national poverty line in 2006.⁹ Poverty was slightly higher in South Tarawa (24 per cent) than the national average and got as high as 36 per cent in the Southern Gilbert islands, which are among the most remote and mostly smallest islands in Kiribati (AusAid, 2012). In contrast, poverty was lowest in the Line islands, which have more natural resources and young migrants. Although poverty is a significant issue in urban areas as in South Tarawa, poverty is generally more severe in remote islands because of issues with supplies, limited resources for production and a high dependency ratio.¹⁰ Poverty also has a gender dimension in Kiribati, with female-headed households overrepresented among the poor (AusAid, 2012).

Besides prevalent poverty, income inequality is considerably high in Kiribati, which had a Gini coefficient of 0.39 in 2006.¹¹ Among the group of islands, the outer Gilberts have the highest inequality (a Gini coefficient above 0.40), while the Line and Phoenix Islands followed by South Tarawa have relatively low inequality (Gini coefficients below 0.35) (AusAid, 2012).

Human development depends on health, knowledge and living standards. Health outcomes have improved remarkably over time. For example, life expectancy at birth has increased significantly since the early 1990s. It was 64 years for men and 71.6 years for women in 2018 (UNDP, 2019), compared to 59.7 for men and 67.5 for women in 2010 (KNSO, 2018). However, an increasing incidence of non-communicable diseases may reverse the gains in life expectancy as the main cause of death in all Pacific Island countries (PICs) including Kiribati (MHMS and WHO, 2016). Infant mortality rate has also improved over time, falling from 54 (per 1,000 live births) in 2000 to 41 in 2018. The population growth rate remains weak with an average

rate of 1.5 per cent for the 2010s.¹² This partly reflects the influence of outward migration flows.

Education has been a successful area in efforts to achieve gender equality in Kiribati. The country has achieved gender parity in both gross and net enrolment rates in primary education. In fact, girls outperform boys in terms of the gross enrolment rate in secondary and tertiary education; the gender parity index is 1.2 and 1.7, respectively (KNSO, 2018).¹³ However, the youth literacy rate is higher for girls (91 per cent) than boys (83 per cent). Among the female population ages 25 and above, around 11 per cent has primary education, 46 per cent have lower secondary education, 38 per cent upper secondary, and close to 4 per cent of women have post-secondary or tertiary education, according to 2015 population census data (Government of Kiribati, 2019).

The educational attainment of the adult population is very similar between men and women. Hence, most men and women of working age in Kiribati have at least a secondary education. A high discrepancy, however, exists between rural and urban areas in terms of educational attainment. Rural populations are less likely to continue beyond compulsory years of schooling due to limited places available, high attendance fees and scattered distribution of senior secondary schools, which implies long travel (CEDAW, 2019).

2.3. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In the first months of 2020, the world experienced an outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Social distancing measures were introduced all around the world after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, resulting in an unprecedented disruption in economic activity and the worst economic and social crisis since the Great Depression. According to the October 2020

⁹ The poverty ratio calculated according to the World Bank's US\$1.90/day (purchasing power parity) poverty line was significantly lower (13 per cent) than the one based on the national poverty line, which is typical for most countries (World Bank, World Development Indicators database available at <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/> (accessed on 9 November 2020).

¹⁰ The dependency ratio refers to the ratio of the dependent population (i.e. children and the elderly) to the working-age population.

¹¹ The Gini coefficient is the most commonly used indicator of income inequality. It measures the extent to which income distribution among individuals or households in an economy deviates from a perfectly equitable distribution. A Gini coefficient of 0 denotes perfect equality (i.e., everyone has the same level of income), while a coefficient of 1 implies perfect inequality (i.e., one person has all the income). Hence the closer the coefficient is to 1, the higher the degree of inequality. A coefficient of 0.4 is considered a benchmark value for high income inequality.

¹² World Bank, World Development Indicators database, available at <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/> (accessed on 1 June 2020).

¹³ The gender parity index (GPI) is equal to the ratio of the girls' enrolment rate to that of boys at each education level.

projections by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the world economy is estimated to contract by 4.4 per cent in 2020, then have a gradual recovery process and, grow by 5.2 per cent in 2021. The impact on low-income households is more severe, adversely affecting the progress in poverty reduction achieved since the 1990s (IMF, 2020).

LDCs face a more severe situation because COVID-19 threatens to reverse their progress towards sustainable development achieved over recent decades. The health systems of LDCs lack the means to effectively cope with a swift increase in infections, and these countries lack the resources to address the socioeconomic consequences of the economic slowdown resulting from the pandemic. Besides its direct implications for garments and tourism sectors in some of the LDCs, the fall in demand for migrant workers and travel bans also negatively affect the inflow of remittances to LDCs (UNDESA, 2020).

Kiribati had zero confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of 27 October 2020 and is at COVID-19 alert level 2, implying social distancing.¹⁴ Despite not being affected by COVID-19 in health terms, Kiribati is still experiencing the negative implications of the global economic contraction. Pacific Trade Invest (PTI) has commissioned an independent research agency to run a regular survey the (latest edition was in October 2020 as the seventh survey wave) in order to examine the effects of COVID-19 on the Pacific region's private sector. The PTI study shows that travel bans and restrictions on gatherings in particular affected tourism businesses adversely across the region: 61 per cent of businesses surveyed reported a very negative impact

of the pandemic, 70 per cent reported a significant decline in revenues, and almost one-third stated that they didn't expect to return to business as usual until 2022 or later (PTI, 2020a).

Female-owned/led businesses have been more negatively affected by the pandemic than male-owned/led businesses (PTI, 2020b). Specifically, 71 per cent of female-owned/led businesses reported that they experienced a very negative effect compared to 57 per cent of male-owned/led ones. The share of businesses experiencing a significant decline in revenue was 77 per cent for female-owned/led businesses and 65 per cent for male ones. A significantly higher share of female-owned/led firms had to temporarily close (41 per cent vs. 29 per cent). Female-owned/led businesses also reported having less confidence that their business will survive (32 per cent vs. 25 per cent).

The COVID-19 pandemic affects women disproportionately in economic terms, as women are more concentrated in precarious, part-time and temporary jobs and in sectors that are directly affected by the pandemic such as services.¹⁵ They also face gender inequalities in access to resources such as credit, which makes survival in times of crisis more difficult for them than their male counterparts. Additionally, women face a disproportionate increase in their unpaid work burden and a higher probability of domestic violence at home. All of these differences between men and women imply that a gender-sensitive policy response is needed to avoid the exacerbation of gender inequalities, as discussed in the policy recommendations.

¹⁴ Higher alert levels imply a much higher burden of unpaid care work for women, as shown by the experience of women traders in Fiji, where the alert level is 4.

¹⁵ See UNCTAD (2020) for the gender implications of COVID-19 on tourism sector in small island developing states.

3. ECONOMIC AND TRADE PROFILE

3.1. ECONOMIC STRUCTURE AND GROWTH PERFORMANCE

Government plays a major role in economic activity in Kiribati, accounting for about half of GDP and around 80 per cent of formal sector jobs (though formal employment corresponds to only 20 per cent of total labour force). The public sector also underpins services, especially in the capital of South Tarawa, where around half of the population lives (MFED, 2018).¹⁶ In terms of economic sectors, the agriculture and fishing sector corresponded to 29.9 per cent of GDP in 2017, and is mainly dependent on fisheries and copra production. Kiribati, like other PICs, has a small industrial base and even a smaller manufacturing sector (4.2 per cent of GDP), while construction makes up 6.7 per cent of GDP. Within services, real estate corresponded to 10.6 per cent of GDP, wholesale and retail trade services 7.9 per cent, financial intermediation services 7.4 per cent, and transport and storage services 4.4 per cent, according to KNSO data for 2017.¹⁷

Beyond subsistence agriculture and fisheries, the private sector plays a very small role in Kiribati's economy. It consists of mostly small firms in the wholesale, retail, and transport sectors. In terms of opportunities for private sector development, fisheries remains the most significant sector. There are also potential opportunities for tourism (MFED, 2018).

Indeed, the fisheries sector is central to exports, economic growth and government revenue of Kiribati. Kiribati's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), spanning over 3.5 million km², is the most productive tuna fishing zone in the Central and Western Pacific. Among the fishing nations in the Pacific, Kiribati had the highest volume of catch over the 2014–2016 period, corresponding to 28.4 per cent of the regional total in 2016 (MFMRD and MFED, 2017). Fisheries generate the highest share of revenues from (1) receipts from both domestic fish sales and exports, (2) gains from fishing licenses and (3) remittances from fishermen working on foreign flagged vessels. Fisheries are

crucial for the subsistence lifestyle in rural areas, with men harvesting fish for own-consumption and women processing the fish and selling eventual surpluses.

The introduction of the Vessel Day Scheme (VDS) in 2012 together with the launch of the Kiribati Fish Limited (KFL) processing plant¹⁸ in 2013 represent a turning point in Kiribati over the past decade. The VDS aims to limit fishing by targeting a total number of days that can be fished in the exclusive economic zones of the eight Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA). Following the introduction of the VDS and KFL, fishing licence revenue, the main source of government revenue, rose from 17 per cent of GDP in 2011 to a peak of 91 per cent of GDP in 2015 and 70 per cent of GDP in 2018. This led to unprecedented growth of government expenditures, making the government, rather than a foreign development partner, the largest financier of public investment for the first time in Kiribati's history (Webb, 2020).¹⁹

Yet, volatility in production, as exemplified by the recent fall in fishing volumes, makes Kiribati vulnerable to external factors. Moreover, climate change may affect the tuna fishery through its anticipated impacts on tuna migration and spawning patterns across the Pacific (MFED, 2018). On the other hand, high dependence on fishing license fees as the main source of government revenue may turn into an advantage in the post-COVID 19 era as the revenues from tuna harvesting are expected to be less affected by the pandemic than, for example, tourism, the main economic sector for many of the small island developing states.

The rise in fishing licence revenue enabled the government to increase the copra subsidy dramatically in 2016 by doubling its value. It has also enabled an increase in public pay and financing for health and education programmes including free basic education (MFED, 2018). As a result, the cost of the copra subsidy scheme increased from 3.5 per cent of GDP in 2015 to 13.3 per cent in 2017 (Webb, 2020). The copra subsidy helps support GDP and export growth, provides a cash

¹⁶ According to MFED (2014), in 2013 services made up 50 per cent of GDP, agriculture 24 per cent, and industry 25 per cent of GDP.

¹⁷ These figures are cited in Webb (2020).

¹⁸ KFL prepares all fresh and frozen tuna fish for export markets.

¹⁹ The completion of the Kiribati Road Rehabilitation Project (KRRP) in Tarawa and the Kiribati Aviation Investment Program (KAIP), which incorporates upgrades to the airports in Tarawa and Kiritimati Island, are the major recent public investment projects.

transfer to outer island economies and encourages people to stay there (to slow urban migration), and is a transfer mechanism for the government to redistribute fishing licence revenue to the outer island population. However, it is also criticized for its distortive effects on household production decisions (e.g. reduction in the viability of alternative uses of coconut such as virgin coconut oil), and for not serving the most vulnerable groups that do not have access to land (World Bank, 2018).

These developments in the agriculture and fishing sector led to a sharp increase in economic growth, from a 0.7 per cent economic contraction over 2006–2011 to 20.5 per cent economic growth between 2012 and 2017, outperforming the regional average. Besides the agriculture and fishing sector, growth in wholesale and retail trade, government consumption and administration, and financial intermediation sectors were other recent drivers of economic growth in Kiribati (Webb, 2020).

Development of fisheries remains the priority of the government of Kiribati. In its Development Plan 2016–2019, the government named increasing economic returns from the fishing sector and ensuring sustainable management of fisheries among the key activities for spearheading economic growth and poverty reduction. The KDP also highlights the need for introducing and effectively implementing a coconut sector development strategy.

The Kiribati 20-Year Vision 2016–2036 (KV20) sets the priorities of the plan and provides further details within a longer-term development strategy. KV20 singled out fisheries as a crucial productive sector for attaining the country's development aspirations and contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Between 60 and 70 per cent of coastal fisheries are for subsistence purposes in Kiribati, while the remaining parts involve artisanal and small-scale commercial fisheries. The vast majority of I-Kiribati rely on subsistence and artisanal fisheries to meet their daily nutrition needs. The artisanal tuna catch is especially high in Kiribati in terms of supplying fresh tuna to town areas, particularly around the densely populated South Tarawa, where demand is high. Artisanal and subsistence fishermen also catch significant amounts of oceanic tuna for local markets and immediate consumption. Oceanic tuna also provides employment

opportunities, especially for men in maritime and fishery positions (Government of Kiribati, 2013).

The commercial component of fisheries has been growing with the expansion of the sector to outer islands and the establishment of fisheries and ice plants on all islands outside South Tarawa. As a result, fish production has expanded in outer islands, resulting in an increase in inter-island trade in coastal finfish and other species. The government has assisted this development through subsidies in freight costs through its freight levy fund. However, overfishing pressures in South Tarawa, Kiritimati and elsewhere create a challenge for the long term. Ensuring food security especially for the densely populated South Tarawa and taking measures to make lagoon fisheries across the country sustainable are the key areas of concern in Kiribati (Government of Kiribati, 2013).

Besides fisheries, KV20 identifies tourism as another key economic sector to target for achieving sustainable development. Indeed, Kiribati has the resources for the material foundation for tourism development, including characteristic geography, human landscape, ecological environment, water sports and historical sites (Xu, 2019). Tourism and related services constitute the major tradable sector in services and are the main source of economic growth and foreign exchange earnings in most small island developing states.

Tourism has the potential to create spillover effects to agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing and other services through its backward and forward sectoral linkages. At present, however, the potential of the tourism sector in Kiribati remains largely untapped, with its share of GDP equal to less than 4 per cent and the employment share of hotels and restaurants sectors at 2.3 per cent.²⁰ This is mainly because of the big shortcomings in tourism facilities and services. These issues include lack of systematic tourism development planning and necessary scenic area design, insufficient tourism investment, issues with transportation and communication infrastructure, and low levels of education and literacy, which affect the quality of tourism services provided (Xu, 2019).

Tourism development also has significant gender implications. Due to low entry barriers, tourism in general has a higher share of women entrepreneurs than other sectors of the economy. As a highly female-intensive sector, tourism can help boost employment

²⁰ Employment figure is based on UNCTAD calculations using the 2015 Population Census data.

and incomes of women entrepreneurs and workers in food and hotel sectors. Tourism therefore has the potential to support gender equality if supportive policies are put in place. Policymakers could build links between tourism and suppliers in other value chains as well to create spillover effects. For example, programmes could be introduced to link women producers of handicrafts, coconut oil, garments and artisanal fisheries to tourism outlets that would develop in the future through procurement and marketing channels. Linking women fish vendor associations to the tourism sector would also be a way of supporting women's participation in the tourism supply chain, as in the case of Coastal Fisheries Initiative in Cabo Verde.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, travel was dominated by business visitors heading mostly to Tarawa, whereas a small number of leisure travellers visited Kiritimati attracted by fishing opportunities. In KV20, the government of Kiribati aims to increase the contribution of tourism to GDP to 50 per cent by 2036 through investments in high-yielding tourism products (e.g. cultural tourism, ecotourism), destination marketing, infrastructure connectivity, and upgrading of tourism sites and facilities, as well as by strengthening human capacity in high-end tourism products. The upswing of tourism in Kiribati nevertheless remains conditioned on major expansion of infrastructure and services, together with development of the private sector and adaptation to changes in travel patterns induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The negative impact of the pandemic on international arrivals also hits handicraft producers, many of whom are women.

Coconut was identified as one of the complementary agricultural sectors that can support the realization of KV20 through its linkages to tourism and other sectors. Coconut, which once generated the highest share of exports, has been propelled by copra subsidies that incentivized copra cutting at the expense of other coconut-based activities such as virgin coconut oil production. Similar to fisheries, coconut growing is highly male-intensive. Besides virgin coconut oil, there is the potential for market development of coconut sugar, where women could participate.

3.2. INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Kiribati relies on a few traditional products as its exports, and imports almost all consumption and capital

goods except for a few such as fish, as in most small island developing states. In 2018, Kiribati exported goods of only AUS\$8.8 million in value compared to total goods imports of AUS\$137.4 million, resulting in a large trade deficit. Kiribati's exports are extremely concentrated, reflecting the weak production basis. Fish (AUS\$4.7 million) is the main exported product of Kiribati, constituting 53 per cent of Kiribati's total exports in 2018. Crude coconut (AUS\$3.2 million) is the other major exported product (36 per cent of total exports), while unprocessed copra (AUS\$0.9 million) has a share of around 10 per cent (KNSO as cited in Webb, 2020). In 2017, fish represented 61.9 per cent of total exports and coconut 15 per cent (KNSO, 2018). The gap between exports of fish and of coconut products has widened since the launch of the KFL.

Kiribati imports a wide range of products. Food products (AUS\$45.5 million) constitute the largest import category making up 40.4 per cent of total merchandise imports. Beverages and tobacco (AUS\$10 million) is the other significant category with a share of 21.9 per cent in total imports. Imports other than food and beverage products include manufactured goods (AUS\$26.1 million or 19 per cent of total imports), machinery and transport equipment (AUS\$25.5 million or 18.5 per cent), fuel (AUS\$19.5 million or 14.2 per cent), and oils, fats, and other chemicals (AUS\$7.3 million or 5.3 per cent) (KNSO as cited in Webb, 2020).

Most merchandise exports reach developing and developed countries of Asia. However, Kiribati does not have consistent export markets, reflecting its small number of exported products and weak international business linkages. Top export destinations over the last decade included Hong Kong, China (2008–2009), Taiwan Province of China (2010–2012), “other” (2013–2015), Malaysia (2016–2017), and Japan (2018). There were at least two years over the past 10 years when Kiribati did not export to each of these markets at all (KNSO as cited in Webb, 2020).

Kiribati is a net importer of services, with a value of imports five times higher than that of exports. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, most exported services fell within the categories of travel, government services, transport and construction services. Imported services include government services, travel and construction services.²¹

²¹ See the UNCTADStat database at <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/EN/>.

Large merchandise and services trade deficits are offset by net transfer payments, leading to a current account balance for Kiribati. Large incomes from fishing license fees (US\$100 million in 2018) and from official development assistance (US\$77 million in 2017) are the major sources of foreign exchange earnings (IMF, 2019). Besides that, remittances sent by Kiribati people working on foreign-flagged vessels and other occupations abroad constitute a vital revenue for many households. The ratio of remittances to GDP has oscillated between 8 and 10 per cent in recent years. In absolute terms, personal remittances reached US\$18.2 million in 2018.²² Revenues from fishing licenses remain the key source of foreign exchange and are destined to replenish the Revenue Equalization Reserve Fund (RERF), which is used to fund fiscal deficits.

Women-dominated production, such as virgin coconut oil, garment products, handicrafts and pandanus mats, represent a very small share of exports, reaching foreign clients mainly through incoming tourism and scarce direct export channels maintained by international development organizations. With the exception of virgin coconut oil (1.6 per cent of exports) and garment products (less than 1 per cent), they do not enter into official statistics due to their unrecorded sales and low-volume production designated for domestic consumption (ITC, 2020).

3.3. INTER-ISLAND TRADE AND NUTRITION

Domestic trade remains fragmented due to extreme geographic dispersion, limited inter-island connectivity, scarce domestic value chain linkages and a small private sector, and it is dominated by imported products (MFED, 2016). Development of domestic supply chains is one of the priorities of the government listed in its Trade Policy Framework 2017–2027, which points to the significant potential of domestic trade for sustainable economic development and improvement in wellbeing. Yet its full development would require a holistic approach across many policy areas and substantial investments in infrastructure development.

For example, inter-island trade between the islands that grow banana and breadfruit and those with more sea products could contribute both to expansion of income-generating activities and improvement of

health outcomes through increased access to and consumption of nutritious crops and higher-quality food products. Inter-island trade also has the potential to contribute to women's economic empowerment, given that women currently participate in international trade at a highly limited level and inter-island trade in female-intensive products has the potential to fill this gap.

Nutrition is a major issue in Kiribati, which will need 50 per cent more food to feed its population by 2030. Poor nutrition in the form of both under-nutrition and over-nutrition as well as their related health problems (e.g. underweight children, obesity, anaemia) is a growing health concern in the country (Otiuea et al., 2019). The share of processed and imported food has increased in diets because of prestige issues, accessibility, cost and convenience, and imported foods, especially rice, have been dominating household expenditure (Connell, 2020). Among all Pacific Island nations, Kiribati has the highest household spending on imported foods, with that spending corresponding to 53 per cent of total household food expenditure. Urbanization is also very extensive in atoll states, including Kiribati, where there is almost no land remaining for agricultural production in urbanized atolls (Sahal and Strobel, 2014). This is another driver of increased consumption of imported foods.

High dependence on imports for foodstuff has implications for the population's nutritional intake of. For example, changing food tastes as a result of imported food reduces the consumption of local foods such as giant taro, pandanus and fish, all of which have high nutritional value (Otiuea et al., 2019). Food security has also worsened over the past half century as agriculture, fishing and local food production have been on the decline in most remote islands. In Kiribati, historically, coconut production was expanded to pay for food imports by cutting down pandanus and breadfruit trees, shifting labour from taro pits to copra production and hence reducing an already limited choice of local food. Deforestation, a decline in biodiversity, declining knowledge of plants and their utility, and less frequent use of traditional conservation practices reduced the significance of wild foods and resulted in less diversity of production and nutrition (Connell, 2020). A case study on South Tarawa and Butaritari found that households have high consumption levels of non-traditional diets and refined foods, which results in

²² Ibid.

inadequate micronutrient intake, low dietary diversity and high risk of noncommunicable diseases (Foliaki and Wham, 2020).

3.4. MARKET ACCESS

Thanks to its LDC status, Kiribati benefits from several preferential agreements providing its products with full or nearly full duty and quota free access to major developed country markets (Australia, Canada, the European Union, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States) and an increasing number of developing country markets (Belarus, Chile, China, Taiwan Province of China, India, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea, Morocco, Montenegro, Russian Federation, Thailand and Turkey).²³ The Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA), which entered into force in 2003, introduced further tariff liberalization among the PICs.

Kiribati has signed and ratified the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus (PACER Plus), a regional development-centred trade agreement. PACER Plus embraces trade in goods, services and investment among Australia, New Zealand and what are known as the 9PICs.²⁴ The agreement will enter into force on 13 December 2020. Due to previous liberalization efforts through the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA) and PICTA, the major benefit expected from PACER Plus for Kiribati is the provision of capacity-building and technical assistance by Australia and New Zealand (UNCTAD, 2019b).

Whereas products from both male- and female-intensive sectors can typically reach foreign markets duty and quota free, non-tariff barriers to trade continue to constitute a significant challenge for Kiribati's exporters. For example, while pandanus mats produced by Kiribati women can be imported duty-free to Australia, the product must meet a number of sanitary and phytosanitary requirements on materials used and technical requirements regarding packaging.

Exporters are not required to hold a licence except for those exporting fish and marine products, which need a licence from the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources Development. Importers need to get licenses, approvals, or permits (where required) from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Cooperatives as well as from Quarantine and the Kiribati Customs Service. An import levy is paid as an additional tax on imports, and the revenue from it is used to subsidize the domestic transport of imported products from the main ports of Tarawa to the outer islands.

Costly documentary and border compliance, in addition to expensive shipping, significantly affects the competitiveness of exported products. The World Bank estimates that costs to export from Kiribati are three times higher than the regional average (table 1) and together with expensive shipping negatively impact the competitiveness of Kiribati products.

Similarly, time-consuming import procedures result in higher import prices and supply failures, negatively affecting the performance of Kiribati-based businesses and especially small producers. Domestic policies need to be adjusted to increase the benefits from

Table 1.
Trading across borders: Kiribati and the regional average, 2020

Economy	Trading across borders index ranking	Time to export: Border compliance (hours)	Cost to export: Border compliance (United States dollars)	Time to export: Documentary compliance (hours)	Cost to export: Documentary compliance (United States dollars)
East Asia & Pacific	103	57.5	381.1	55.6	109.4
Kiribati	135	72	420	24	310

Source: World Bank (2020a).

²³ See the United Nations LDC portal, available at <https://www.un.org/ldcportal/preferential-market-access-for-goods/>.

²⁴ Cook Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu

trade openness through free trade agreements for local products. Remarkably, the coronavirus pandemic provided additional impetus to gradual introduction of electronic procedures, now available for incoming vessels.

Programmes to support businesses to import and export are quite limited in Kiribati. The Trade Promotion Division within the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Cooperatives mainly focuses on inter-island trade (e.g. bringing agricultural produce to Tarawa). Similarly, women-focused programmes carried out by the Ministry for Women, Youth and Social Affairs are targeted to service the outer islands. Women business owners interviewed in a field study in Kiribati stated that it was difficult to clear goods through customs at the port, rules were unclear, and the process was costly. There was even a business

that recruited a staff member to deal solely with trade-related issues. Product consistency was also cited as an issue by women business owners using local suppliers. Poor understanding of target markets and their expectations often led to production of goods for which there is little international demand (ADB, 2018).

Kiribati's Trade Policy Framework 2017–2027 lists the introduction of the single trade window, with technical assistance from UNCTAD, enhanced cooperation of border agencies, alignment of local practices to international standards, and adoption of trade facilitation systems as key short and mid-term priorities for trade facilitation. In this context, Kiribati is served by Pacific Trade Invest, a trade facilitation initiative for the Pacific sponsored by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (ADB, 2018).

4. THE LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Kiribati has introduced various policy instruments on gender equality at the national, regional and international levels. Kiribati is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Revised Pacific Platform for Action on the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality (2005–2015), and the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (2012). Other international and regional policy instruments include the SDGs and the recommendations of the Pacific Women's Triennial, Outcomes of the Commission on the Status of Women meetings (Government of Kiribati, 2019).

At the national level, the Constitution prohibits gender-based discrimination. The Ministry of Women, Youth, Sports and Social Affairs (MWYSA) was established in 2013 to mainly target high levels of violence against women. The Women's Development Division (WDD) was created in January 2011 under the Ministry of Internal and Social Affairs and then became part of the MWYSA. The WDD aims to promote gender equality and improve women's and girls' status and livelihoods in Kiribati by enabling their equal access to resources, opportunities and rights as well as full participation in economic, social and political life. The WDD's responsibilities include developing, implementing and monitoring gender policies and programmes on gender equality, providing technical assistance (e.g. training, financial support) to women's organizations and other stakeholders, hosting national events and awareness raising activities, collecting data and preparing reports.²⁵ Many ministries also undertake activities with an explicit focus on gender equality (e.g. inclusive education policy, WDD training programmes), but they are provided on an ad hoc basis based on the availability of funding (Government of Kiribati, 2019).

In response to the prevalence of physical and sexual violence against women, the government adopted the national Eliminating Sexual and Gender Based Violence (ESGBV) Policy 2011–2021 and the *Te Rau n te Mwenga* Act (Family Peace Act) and its Implementation Plan (2014). Other national policy instruments directed toward gender equality are the

Kiribati Government Manifesto (Motinnano), Kiribati 20-year Vision (KV20), Kiribati Development Plan 2016–2019, Kiribati Shared Implementation Plan for ESGBV (SHIP), and the Ministry of Women, Youth and Social Affairs (MWYSSA) Strategic Plan (Government of Kiribati, 2019).

Both the Kiribati Development Plan 2016–2019 (KDP) and Kiribati 20-year Vision 2016–2033 (KV20) incorporate gender considerations into their development strategies. KDP introduces gender equality issues in the context of health, domestic violence, and governance. KV20 lists gender, youth, vulnerable groups and equity among the cross-cutting issues of the strategy. KV20 states that government will mainstream gender in its policies, plans, budgets and programmes to improve equal opportunity for men and women. In this regard, KV20 shifted the focus of the government from targeting gender violence to gender mainstreaming across all policy areas. KV20 aims to improve access to vocational training and skill development, especially in tourism and fisheries and other complementary sectors.

The government of Kiribati launched its National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Development 2019–2022 (GEWD) in March 2019 to support women's participation in economic, social and political life. As the country's first policy framework on gender and development, the GEWD includes five priority areas (Government of Kiribati, 2019): (1) Progressive implementation of a gender mainstreaming approach to achieve gender equality, (2) Improvement in the economic empowerment of women, (3) Support for stronger and informed families, (4) Improvement in women's political representation and leadership, and (5) Elimination of sexual and gender-based violence. Given the complex nature of creating an enabling environment for women's economic empowerment, the GEWD prioritizes a complex approach and foresees the creation of "a broad strategy to increase women's incomes - from education through livelihoods to earning overseas to setting up businesses," with a particular focus on enhancing women's livelihoods in outer islands.

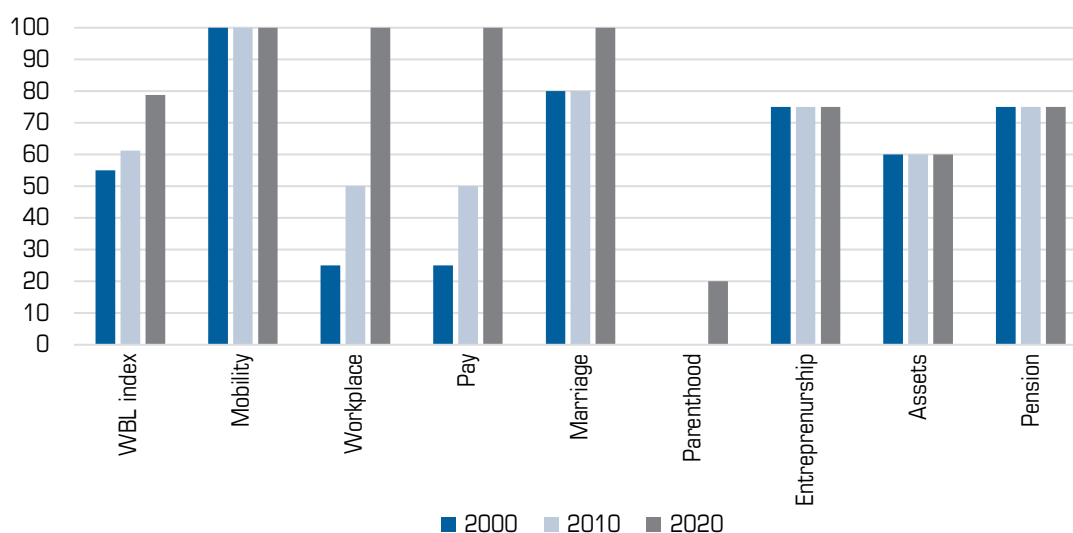
²⁵ <https://www.mwysa.gov.ki/department-and-services/women-s-development.html>

The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law (WBL) database provides an overview of legal frameworks on gender equality at the national level. Table 2 presents summary scores on different dimensions of gender equality calculated by the World Bank (2020b). The WBL index provides a summary measure based on the scores on these different dimensions of gender equality (100 is the maximum score). Kiribati showed an improvement in its total score over the last two decades from 55 in 2000 to 78.8 in 2020. Legal rights on gender quality in mobility, the workplace, marriage and pay-related areas are introduced fully, and in entrepreneurship to a significant extent, in Kiribati. Parenthood rights is a major area where Kiribati needs to take bold steps. As of 1 June 2020, only the dismissal of pregnant workers was prohibited, while there is no paid maternity leave of at least 14 weeks,²⁶ no paid leave for fathers, no paid parental leave, and no full coverage of maternity leave benefits by the government. The Parliament needs to introduce such legal protections to support women's economic

participation in the formal sector. Moreover, this mechanism of employer-liability for maternity benefits also often engenders a bias against hiring women of childbearing age to avoid the economist cost, more so compared to schemes financed by taxes where society shares the cost (UNESCAP and ILO, 2020).

The laws should also prohibit discrimination in access to credit based on gender and provide equal ownership rights to immovable property, especially important for women producers. Less than 20 per cent of the population is covered by one or more social protection scheme,²⁷ putting Kiribati under the group of low-coverage countries (UNESCAP and ILO, 2020). Within pension benefits, accounting for periods of absence from work due to childcare in pension benefits is an area of reform needed in terms of ensuring gender equality in pensions. Finally, while formal employment is a prerequisite to benefit from various legal rights such as paid maternity leave, most of the female labour force does not have access to such employment.²⁸

Figure 2.
Scores on different dimensions of the legal framework on gender inequality



Source: World Bank, Women Business and the Law database, available at <https://wbl.worldbank.org/> (accessed on 3 June 2020).

²⁶ The Employment Relations and Industrial Relations Code 2015 makes 12 weeks of maternity leave possible based on the conditions of individual employment contracts. For example, public sector employment provides 12 weeks of maternity leave that is fully paid for the first two births only. It is split as six weeks prior to delivery and six weeks after delivery (KNSO, 2018).

²⁷ These are predominantly contributory schemes that collect regular financial contributions based on income in exchange for minimum guaranteed benefits, often at the expense of the employer.

²⁸ In light of COVID-19, some Pacific Island countries have acted to incorporate social programs to prevent discriminatory distributional outcomes for the poorest in the economy. Tuvalu will introduce a basic income, Vanuatu a wage subsidy for formal sector workers, and Samoa unemployment benefits (Edwards, 2020).

5. GENDER INEQUALITIES IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL LIFE

5.1. WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING

Women's growing interest in politics has not transferred into significant gains in their political representation in elected legislative and local government bodies. With 4 women out of 45 members (8.9 per cent) of the 12th Parliament (2020–2024),²⁹ Kiribati performs below the average of a 19.7 per cent share of female MPs for the Pacific region and 25.1 per cent globally.³⁰ Kiribati ranks 172nd out of 192 countries reviewed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.³¹ Women's limited representation in the Parliament remains a concern in the context of the GEWD policy, which considers women's parliamentary representation as a reflection of how a society regards women as having an equal role with men in decision-making. Women also hold a low share of CEO positions at state-owned enterprises (15 per cent), according to data for 2015 (Government of Kiribati, 2019).

Women perform significantly better in non-elected (or staff) senior government positions, for which gender parity was reached by 2015 (CEDAW, 2019): 54 per cent of positions of secretary of government ministries, 44 per cent of judges, and 37 per cent of managerial positions are held by women, according to data for 2015 (Government of Kiribati, 2019). However, the share of women in ministerial positions fell from 23 per cent in 2014 to zero in 2019. The share of female business owners was 25 per cent and female directors 33.3 per cent in 2019.³²

Men still dominate island councils, which are local government institutions elected every four years. In 2015, only 5 per cent of councillors were women (KNSO, 2018). Weak representation of women in elected posts is more pronounced in rural areas. Most island councils, however, maintain the posts of Women Interest Workers (WIW), a focal officer responsible for women's programmes and activities, and recognize Women's Associations as bodies representing women's interests. Participation of Women's Associations representatives in island councils is increasingly common. Women's Associations from all

inhabited islands of Kiribati are gathered under the umbrella organization Aia Maea Ainen Kiribati (AMAK), which lobbies for their interests and provides training.

Island Councils recognize decisions of *unimane* (male elders), a traditional decision-making body for community matters. A member of the unimane association is designated as an ex-officio member of the council. Traditional male dominance in unimane is slowly changing and women have started to become part of the decision-making process at the local level. Such developments, together with a growing influence of Women's Associations in island politics, represent an important milestone toward changing traditional male dominance in local decision-making. Increasing women's participation in decision-making bodies in cooperative and producer organizations is also necessary. Although fish is a highly male-intensive sector, women's active participation in fishermen cooperatives, as in the case of Arorae Fisherman Cooperation, helps them become part of the decision-making processes on production.

Changes at the local level are propelled by similar developments at the household level, with women across rural and urban areas enjoying increasing autonomy in decision-making about spending of the income generated by their paid economic activities (AusAid, 2018).

5.2. WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET

The Kiribati labour market is characterized by severe unemployment, high informality and high horizontal segregation. Formal wage/salary job positions are scarce and concentrated in urban areas with a stronger presence of public sector employment over private employment. Women participate in the labour market to a lesser extent than men (60 and 74 per cent, respectively). The unemployment rate is much higher among women (47 per cent) than it is among men (36 per cent) in Kiribati (figure 3). There are significant differences in employment rates

²⁹ "Kiribati Parliament votes in first female speaker," Pacific Women in Politics, 22 May 2020, available at <https://www.pacwip.org/resources/news/kiribati-parliament-votes-in-first-female-speaker/> (accessed on 8 November 2020).

³⁰ Based on the Inter-Parliamentary Union database available at https://data.ipu.org/content/kiribati?chamber_id=13441 and <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages> (accessed on 7 November 2020).

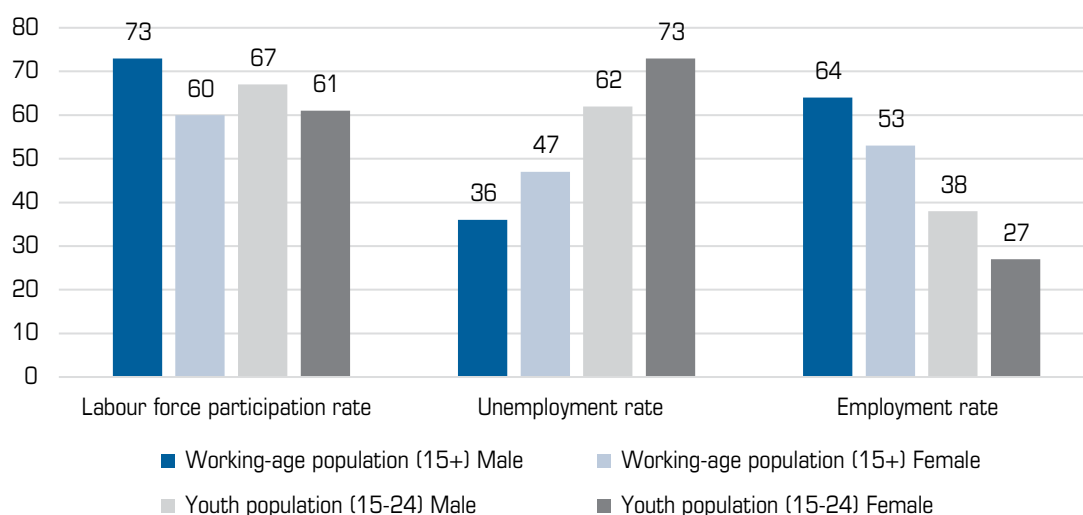
³¹ Ibid.

³² World Bank Gender Statistics database, available at <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=gender-statistics> (accessed on 25 October 2020).

between the main island groups as well. In the Gilbert Islands, employment rates range from 50 per cent in islands close to capital to less than 9 per cent in rural

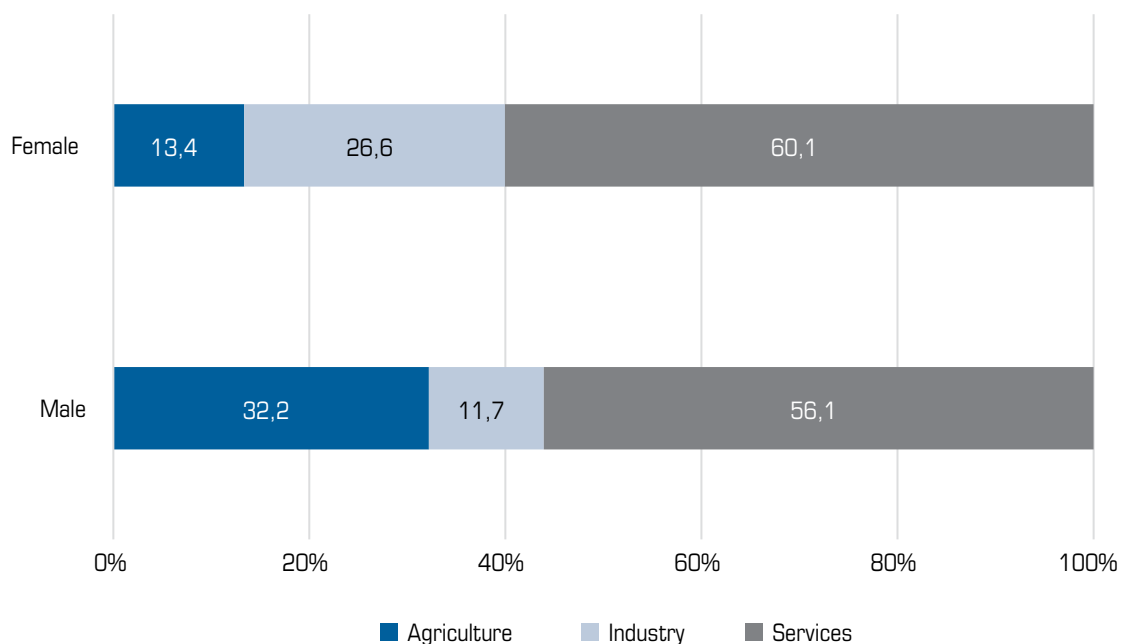
outer islands. In the Line Islands, employment rates oscillate around 30 per cent of the total population aged 15 and above.³³

Figure 3.
Key labour market indicators, 2015 (per cent)



Source: KNSO (2018) based on the 2015 Population Census.

Figure 4.
Distribution of employed men and women by broad economic sectors (per cent share)



Source: KNSO (2018) based on 2015 Population Census Data.

³³ UNCTAD calculations using 2015 population census data.

Similar to the pattern in the sectoral composition of GDP, services sector dominates the employment structure in Kiribati, employing 60 per cent of women and 56 per cent of men. Agriculture and fisheries is a significantly more important source of employment for men (32 per cent) than women (13 per cent) (figure 4). In contrast, industry – mainly manufacturing – is more important for women (27 per cent) than for men (12 per cent).

In terms of the employment shares of individual sub-sectors, agriculture (18 per cent) and fishing (14 per cent) are the top sectors for men in Kiribati (table 2). This mainly reflects men's overrepresentation in fishing and copra production. Coconut copra production accounts for almost 90 per cent of employment in agriculture, and is mainly undertaken by men. The same applies to fishing. In 2015, 75 per cent of coconut copra growers and 82 per cent of those employed in fishing activities were men.^{34,35} Women's participation remains quite limited in the two major supply chains – copra and fish – that constitute Kiribati's major export products, as discussed in section 3.2.

The fisheries sector, in which 70 per cent of Kiribati's households participate either for own consumption, for sale, or both,³⁶ is characterized by clear gender

segregation. Women are not socially expected to fish at sea due to the various dangers involved, such as handling unfriendly species (sharks, swordfish, etc.) and going adrift. As a result, men dominate fishing activities at sea while women are heavily involved in shore-based harvesting, gleaning and processing activities (e.g. cleaning, cutting, salting and drying of fish). The increased commercialization in artisanal fishing, especially on South Tarawa, has been changing this trend. Women are more engaged in the daily management and running of fish outlets and in the marketing and sales of fish (Government of Kiribati, 2013).

Manufacturing is the top employment sector for women (26 per cent) in Kiribati. It also has the highest female intensity of employment (77 per cent) in the country. Within manufacturing, cigarette production (9.6 per cent), handicraft production (7 per cent), food and beverages (5.1 per cent), and (mostly informal) garment production (2.8 per cent) are the main areas where women are employed.³⁷ In contrast, only 5.7 per cent of men are employed in manufacturing overall. It seems clear that policies to support women in manufacturing in terms of skill upgrading and training, business development and access to domestic and international markets are very important in the context of Kiribati.

Table 2.
Share of each sector in total male and female employment (per cent)

Share of each sector in total male employment		Share of each sector in total female employment	
Agriculture	18.4	Manufacturing	25.6
Fishing	13.8	Wholesale and retail trade	14.3
Public administration	13.5	Education	11.2
Wholesale and retail trade	10.8	Public administration	11.1
Rental and businesses	9.7	Agriculture	9.4
Manufacturing	5.7	Health	5.7
Transport and postal	5.6	Fishing	4.0
Construction	4.8	Personal services	3.3

Source: UNCTAD calculations using 2015 Population Census data in KNSO (2016, table 33).

Note: Only the top eight sectors are presented for the sake of brevity. They correspond to 82 and 84 per cent of total male and female employment, respectively.

³⁴ UNCTAD calculations based on data in KNSO (2016, table 33).

³⁵ UNCTAD calculations based on 2015 population census data.

³⁶ This figure is based on the 2015 Kiribati Population Census.

³⁷ UNCTAD calculations on the share of individual sub-sectors in total male and female employment, as well as the female share of employment in each sector, are based on the 2015 Population Census data as presented in KNSO (2016).

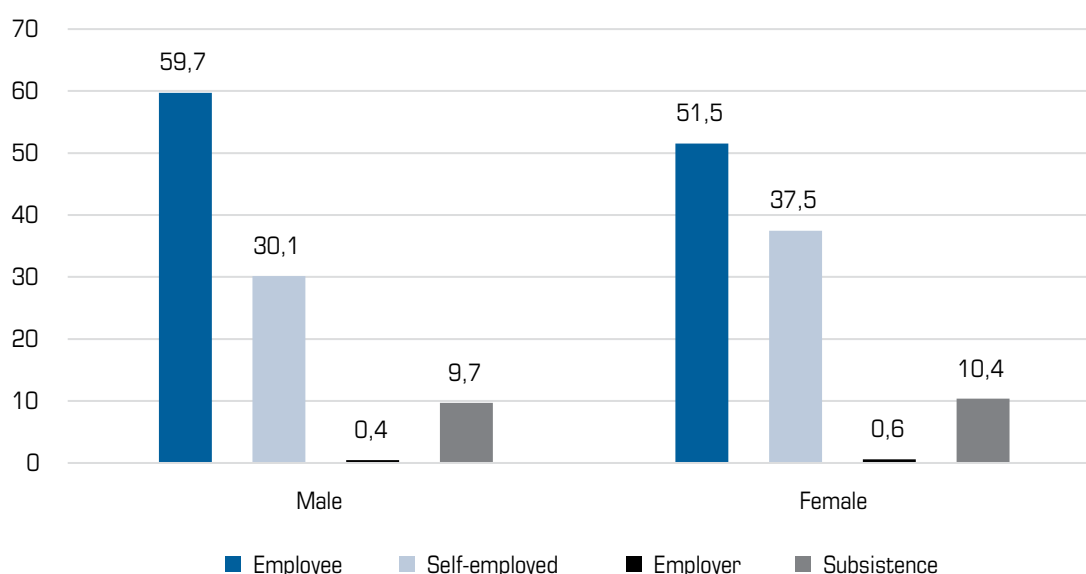
Wholesale and retail trade is the second most important employment sector for women (14 per cent). Retail shops constitute around half of employment in this sub-sector. It is followed by education, public administration and health sector jobs. As is typical in most countries, health and education sectors are highly female-intensive, with women making up around 70 per cent of employment in both sectors.³⁸ For men, public administration, wholesale and retail trade, rental and businesses, transport and postal are the major sub-sectors of employment within services (table 2).

In Kiribati, tourism corresponds to a small share of total employment, reflecting the limited tourism capacity of the country as discussed in section 3.1. The hotels and restaurants sector – which covers the main tourism-related services – corresponds to 1.6 per cent of male and 3.3 per cent of female employment in Kiribati. A

significantly higher share of women (20 per cent) than men (7 per cent) are employed in sectors considered as cultural.³⁹ This seems to reflect the influence of handicraft production, which could be linked to tourism development. Supporting the development of tourism, which is highlighted in KV20 as a priority area, is critical for gender equality considerations. Finally, gender segregation of employment is less pronounced across work status categories as opposed to sectors (figure 5).

Employment is divided across formal and informal lines in Kiribati as in most developing countries, with the public sector providing two-thirds of formal employment. Private sector development is limited by the small size and scale of the economy and the high cost of doing business, and is highly concentrated in South Tarawa.⁴⁰ However, the private sector has been

Figure 5.
Employment composition by work status and sex (per cent)



Source: UNCTAD calculations based on data from KNSO (2018).

³⁸ UNCTAD calculations on the female share of employment in each sector are based on 2015 Population Census data as presented in KNSO (2016).

³⁹ UNESCO defines “cultural industries” as sectors that produce and distribute cultural goods or services. Cultural goods refer to consumer goods that convey ideas, symbols and ways of life, i.e. books, magazines, multimedia products, software, recordings, films, videos, audio-visual programmes, crafts and fashion. Cultural services aim at satisfying cultural interests or needs and do not represent cultural material goods in themselves but facilitate their production and distribution.

⁴⁰ There are approximately 2,000 registered businesses and only two of them employ more than 200 workers. Moreover, around 80 per cent of these businesses are in South Tarawa and 10 per cent in Kiritimati (MCIC, 2017).

growing over the past decade, as shown by the rapid increase in the number of private sector contributors to the Kiribati Provident Fund (KPF), which is likely to underestimate the actual increase because of the high level of informality in the economy. Approximately 60 per cent of Kiribati's working population were not KPF contributors in 2015, which can serve as a proxy for the level of informal employment (MCIC, 2017). Women are more likely to be involved in informal work such as garment, handicraft production, and artisanal fish processing. The development of the formal private sector should also be a priority area to support women as producers and traders in Kiribati.

The government included the design of complementary measures to improve the business regulatory environment among the main objectives of its Trade Policy Framework. As an indirect way of addressing the shortage of formal private sector employment, the government promotes employment of I-Kiribati overseas or on foreign flagged vessels, which are mainly reserved for men as seamen and fishermen. Remittances are an important source of income for many households. Around 13 per cent of households had remittance from seafarers and 18 per cent from other sources of remittance in 2010. I-Kiribati also benefit from seasonal workers' programmes offered by Australia and New Zealand. Yet their participation is much lower than that of their peers from other PICs, and the available statistics suggest that men largely prevail (MCIC, 2017). In contrast, women face the negative repercussions of high levels of gender segregation in the maritime industry, including limited formal labour migration opportunities for women to train and work on foreign vessels (ADB, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has also put the seasonal programmes on hold.

5.3. INCOME-EARNING ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS

This section presents an overview of the main income-earning activities of women producers in the four islands covered in the UNCTAD survey. That is followed by a discussion of the main challenges faced by women producers in rural and urban areas as identified through the surveys and consultations carried out with relevant stakeholders.⁴¹

According to the findings of the UNCTAD survey, in urban areas the need for income generation arises mainly from larger family size and lack of land to grow basic crops, which must be bought from rural islands. Rural women seek additional income to upgrade their subsistence-based livelihoods. Given the central role of church and communities in rural areas, rural women further seek to generate income to meet their church tithes or village dues. Women are major rural fundraisers and stay at the forefront of many community initiatives, including the creation of informal financial pools. Most rural women, however, confirm that the income earned is usually just enough to meet their immediate needs. Both groups – urban and rural – then use the income remaining to cover costs of children's education.

Rural women predominantly engage in income-earning activities as producers in the informal or semi-formal economy, bypassing licensing requirements that might be too complex and costly. UNCTAD survey findings confirm that earning activities of rural women are more likely to have an ad hoc character and are subject to significant fluctuations. Complex and costly licensing requirements applied by Island Councils result in a low number of registered businesses on rural islands, including almost all retail outlets (AusAid, 2018). Rural women producers typically operate from home or from a community/church centre.

Urban areas provide a broader variety of opportunities for income-generating activities. This mainly reflects the availability of a wider range of customers, including public institutions and clients from a more developed private sector in urban areas. The UNCTAD survey suggests that women in urban areas are more likely to formalize and expand their businesses and use more sophisticated outlets such as roadside stalls. Besides the need to support their families, women producers in urban areas actively respond to the emerging demand for various products and services. For example, in South Tarawa, there is growing demand for lunch meals from government offices and schools and for agricultural products more broadly. In the supply of cooked food, there are also networks of workers besides women residing in urban areas. These networks include workers from outer islands who are either temporarily in Tarawa or send supply from outer islands.

⁴¹ See Annex I for the list of stakeholders interviewed.

In rural and urban areas covered by the UNCTAD survey, most of the income-generating economic activities are common to women producers and traders (table 3). They include the major economic sectors such as agriculture (fishing, coconut products, etc.), manufacturing (handicrafts, garments, food and drinks, etc.) and some services such as restaurants that are significant for women's employment in Kiribati, as presented in section 5.2.

Although many income-generating activities are performed by both rural and urban women, their

scale differs depending on the production conditions in each setting. For example, the lack of arable land limits the extent of agricultural activities in urban areas, and local fish harvest in South Tarawa is threatened by overfishing. Cigarette production in urban areas depends on the supply of pandanus leaves from rural islands. Women are also likely to engage in more than one economic activity. Moreover, women in urban areas are more likely to engage in formal and larger-scale production as opposed to rural women producers who are mostly informal.

Table 3.
Economic activities carried out by rural and urban women producers in Kiribati

Both rural and urban	
Production of handicrafts (e.g. articles made from pandanus leaves or shells such as necklaces, fans, mats, bowls, hats, bags, baskets)	
Preparation of fish products (e.g. tuna jerky, salted fish, fresh fillet fish)	
Home-gardening of vegetables and fruits (e.g. pumpkins, bananas, <i>baba</i> ¹)	
Production of bakery products (e.g. bread, buns, donuts)	
Production of garments (e.g. local blouses, pillowcases, school uniforms)	
Cigarette making from pandanus leaves and tobacco	
Only Rural	Only urban
Production of coconut coil ² and coconut oil	Preparation of cooked food , road-side sale of food and door-to-door sale to government offices and schools ³
	Preparation and sale of drinks such as noni juice ⁴
	Making and selling of thatch for local houses ⁵
	Sewing of mauri blouses
	Operation of accommodation facilities, and restaurants (e.g. Kiritimati)
	Refining of crude coconut oil , production of virgin coconut oil

Source: UNCTAD Survey. The distribution of activities is based on the interviews with women producers from the Makin, Arorae, South Tarawa and Kiritimati islands. Makin and Arorae are considered rural areas and South Tarawa and Kiritimati island are included among urban areas.

¹ The variety of fruits and vegetables differs depending on island-specific climatic conditions.

² Dried meat or kernel of the coconut.

³ Sale to offices is typical in South Tarawa, home to most government agencies.

⁴ Juice made of the fruit of a noni tree (*Morinda citrifolia*), grown in Kiribati, Tahiti or Hawaii. Noni fruit has been used in Polynesian traditional medicine.

⁵ Thatch is a traditional roofing material.

5.4. WOMEN IN INTER-ISLAND AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Inter-island trade

Women producers more actively participate in inter-island trade than international trade in Kiribati, reflecting the fragmented nature of supply chains. Inter-island trade mainly occurs from rural areas towards main urban centres, as identified by the UNCTAD survey. For example, women producers in Makin sell their agricultural produce and handicrafts to the main island of South Tarawa. Women producers in Arorae, the southernmost island of the Gilberts, supply their produce such as smoked fish and aluminium products to South Tarawa and close islands like Tabituea North and South and Beru. Women from rural areas sell these products to other islands through various channels, including family and friends, registered agents and business outlets, and women's and church centres. Direct inter-island trade is conditioned by short distance and good transport connection to main urban centres such as South Tarawa or Kiritimati. Women from North Tarawa, for example, catch a boat five times a week to deliver cooked local food to clients working at governmental offices in South Tarawa.

Producers from more remote rural areas rely on registered agents who sell their products in the commercial hubs of South Tarawa and Kiritimati. For example, women from the Northern Gilberts, which has favourable conditions for agriculture, sell their harvest to outlets in South Tarawa through registered agents, according to the UNCTAD survey. Registered agents also facilitate deliveries of unprocessed items for their further processing in the main hubs. For example, they connect producers of crude coconut oil in outer islands with oil refining facilities in urban areas.

Church outlets are a major channel for women producers to sell their products in both rural and urban areas, according to the UNCTAD survey. For example, women producers from outer islands send their handicrafts to the RAK Handicraft Centre in Tangintebu or the Itoiningaina Handicraft Centre in Teoraereke, both in South Tarawa. They also send their products to local travel agents such as Tobaraoi. In Kiritimati, handicraft producers send their products to Tabuaeran, Teraina, to sell them to on cruise ship tourists.

International trade

UNCTAD survey findings show that women producers in urban areas are ahead of their rural peers in terms of engagement in exports. Some of them exported virgin coconut oil, smoked fish and mauri blouses, even though in small quantities, mainly through friends/family living abroad. They see international markets as potential outlets for their production if there is development of better linkages with international clients and better connectivity to international markets. They are also more likely to produce goods with higher value-added, which would be more competitive on foreign markets, and at higher volumes demanded by international buyers.

Handicraft products, where women are highly concentrated in production (as shown in section 5.2), can be sold internationally. According to the UNCTAD survey, women handicraft producers reach international clients through church outlets such as handicraft centres in locations visited by travellers, hospitality facilities, agents, sales to foreign outlets, and personal channels. In Kiritimati, the main destination for leisure tourism in Kiribati, handicraft makers offer their products to local agents and hotels. Kiritimati-based producers further use the services of vendors from Tabuaeran Island who offer goods to travellers on cruise ships that stop there.⁴²

Even if tourism is not a major economic activity for the Kiribati economy, the contraction of tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a negative effect on economic activities linked to tourism with a high presence of female producers (e.g. handicraft sales, food services). Church outlets on South Tarawa remain crucial for sales of traditional products originating in remote islands to foreign customers visiting the island.

Plans for expansion and diversification of production

All UNCTAD survey respondents stated that they had plans for expanding their production. Both in rural and urban areas, women producers want to shift their production from home-based activity to more structured settings such as retail shops and community business centres. In urban areas, the additional motivations that women producers have for expansion are to meet the

⁴² Tabuaeran Island is also known as Fanning Island.

growing demand for their products (e.g. cooked food, garments, handicrafts) in South Tarawa and to explore new markets (e.g. neighbouring Pacific Islands).

Women producers of handicrafts also have plans to diversify their products. In this regard, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Cooperatives (MCIC) organizes training programmes on outer islands. For example, Arorae women took a workshop on new designs and artistic skills on handicraft production delivered by a trainer from South Tarawa in the fall of 2019. The Ministry of Women, Youth, and Social Affairs (MWYSA) organized the Women Expo in 2018, which was an eye opener for many producers. For example, women producers from Arorae and Makin had the chance to show their products, meet customers and learn from each other. Handicraft producers also want to produce agricultural products such as coconut-based products and smoked fish to expand their income-generating activities.

International development programmes play an important role in helping women producers to export in Kiribati. The New Zealand High Commission, for example, endorsed the establishment of a Tarawa-based Nei Nibarara Group of women handicraft producers. The network provided training and support to its members on business management issues (e.g. marketing, packaging, pricing, and quality control) and sold women's products through NZ Trade Aid. Training sessions were held in partnership with the Pacific Finance, Trade and Investment Commission. Women gathered in the group offered their products, mostly home decorations, to New Zealand customers via Trade Aid NZ. After initially receiving resources from NZ Trade Aid, the group became self-funded (AusAid, 2018). However, even though it started off successfully, this arrangement later faced managerial and communication challenges after a change in its management and ceased operation.

6. MAJOR CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN PRODUCERS IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS

Private sector expansion and trade development remain a major issue in Kiribati despite some progress achieved over the last decade. Limited supply capacity and producer market linkages, poor marketing infrastructure (e.g. storage facilities) and poor inter-island connectivity constrain domestic trade for local products. There is also limited skills of producers on supply chain management and lack of awareness among producers on the available support programmes such as the freight levy subsidy (MCIC, 2017). Costly and lengthy business processes, licensing requirements, limited access to credit and an overall weak business environment further inhibit the expansion of private sector and export activities. Beyond subsistence agriculture and fishing, the private sector consists of small firms mostly in wholesale and retail trade and transport sectors (MFED, 2018).

Besides issues common to all producers, women producers face a broader range of supply-side constraints resulting from societal gender norms and overall gender inequalities such as the unpaid work burden, unequal access to resources, and a lack of skill development and training, as discussed in section 5. The interviews carried out by UNCTAD with producers and other key stakeholders revealed seven major types of challenges negatively impacting the expansion of women-run businesses and their involvement in domestic (or inter-island) and international trade, and identified some important differences between rural and urban areas in Kiribati.

6.1. TIME POVERTY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Kiribati society remains predominantly patriarchal, with clearly defined gender roles for men and women. Men are traditionally attributed the role of primary breadwinners and women assume the role of unpaid care and domestic work providers. Indeed, in its GEWD policy, the government acknowledges that addressing prevailing gender norms is of crucial importance for enhancing women's economic empowerment. Of the total number of households, 23 per cent are headed

by women (Government of Kiribati, 2019). Female-headed households result, to a great extent, from the absence of men who work as crew on foreign flagged vessels. The unpaid work burden shouldered mainly by women renders income-generating economic activities secondary for many women and results in time poverty, more severely felt by rural women.

Women's intensive involvement in church and community activities further reduces the time available for income-generating activities, according to UNCTAD survey findings. This is especially true for rural women, who dedicate up to 60 per cent of their time to church/village/community duties. Urban women, on the other hand, reported still having enough time for their businesses after carrying out their household and church responsibilities, even though they still suffer from time poverty due to the traditional gender division of labour within the household.

Gender-based violence within the domestic sphere is another significant constraint faced by Kiribati women. According to a 2019 baseline study commissioned by the MWYSSA and UN Women, 2 out of 5 women in South Tarawa have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in the past year, while 68 per cent of women and girls have been victims of intimate partner violence in their lifetime.⁴³ Intimate partner violence is engendered in prevailing social and cultural norms that justify violence against women if and when they are unable to fulfill their expected household responsibilities. This is reinforced by the operative belief that men hold the decision power over women's time use, contraception and impregnation, and often, disobeying leads to violence as a disciplinary mechanism. Systematic intimate partner violence incited by societal norms is reflected in men reporting a higher perpetration of violence (57 per cent) than what women reported as victims (38 per cent). This shows that women increasingly find intimate partner violence normal or are discouraged from disclosing it and expressing their feelings (UN Women, 2020a). Indeed, Borovnik (2007) finds that in the cultural context of South Tarawa, and Kiribati in

⁴³ In 2008, 36 per cent of women age 15-49 were subjected to physical and/or sexual violence in Kiribati in the last 12 months according to the World Bank's Gender Statistics database, available at <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=gender-statistics> (accessed on 25 October 2020).

general, women are expected not to talk about their emotions or question their roles in domestic care.⁴⁴

There are also some positive changes about attitudes towards women's roles, especially in urban areas, that reduce the severity of time poverty faced by women. The adoption of the ESGBV Policy and the *Te rau n te Mwenga* Act (Family Peace Act) and related awareness raising campaigns targeting physical and/or sexual violence against women helped challenge the perception of women as subordinate family members. Moreover, to combat long entrenched normalizing of intimate partner violence, the ESGBV project in coordination with the MWYSSA and Ministry of Education (MoE) has introduced a Moral Education Curriculum as a primary prevention tool for violence against women. This is aimed at mainstreaming gender equality, non-discriminatory behaviour and values into children's teaching materials to promote behavioural changes in future generations that will shape social norms going forward (CEDAW, 2019).

Women's increased engagement with income-generating economic activities has also led to a more balanced gender division of labour within the household, according to the UNCTAD survey. In urban areas, women producers and traders stated that their husbands and other household members recognize the contribution of their business to the family, and have started assisting them in their business activities as well as household chores and childcare while they are busy selling their products outside the home. For example, in South Tarawa and Kiritimati, handicraft producers enjoyed the support of their family in collecting raw materials such as shells, and food vendors got the help of their husbands while cooking food. Some of the urban women producers also had the financial independence to get domestic help.

Integrated efforts under the ESGBV policy are even more relevant now than ever before in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbates time poverty for women with a heightened domestic care burden. Moreover, Pacific countries are notorious for the escalation of domestic violence and disruptions to critical support services during crises, as seen throughout natural calamities as well as the past Zika outbreak (UN Women, 2020b). In the context of quarantine and isolation, women's lack of sexual

and reproductive autonomy is amplified. On the one hand, they are vulnerable to sexual violence by male family members and non-consensual sex demanded from male partners. On the other hand, community lockdowns make it all the more difficult to access family planning and post-rape healthcare services. This makes it paramount that the ESGBV policy framework be reflected in the national safety and crisis response (Pacific Women, 2020a).

6.2. SOCIAL ISSUES

Urban producers in Kiritimati express a lack of confidence in their own ability more than their rural peers, according to UNCTAD survey findings. This translates into a lack of initiative and fear to expand business activities. At the same time, they believe that the role of women entrepreneurs is widely recognized. This is in line with the previous findings of AusAid (2018) that pointed to a lack of motivation among women producers as a result of numerous challenges and a lack of leadership.⁴⁵ Women from rural areas do not mention lack of self-confidence as a major concern, but they feel isolated due to the geographical and financial hardships of having to travel to other islands.

In Kiribati, women's groups play an important role in addressing some of these social issues faced by women producers and traders. Most women are involved in a woman's group at the village/community or church level. They feel empowered and increase their self-confidence through these groups by participating in decision-making and assuming leadership roles. They become motivated to improve the welfare of women in their communities through collective effort. They also praise the fact that representatives of Women's Associations are increasingly consulted by Island Councils.

6.3. ACCESS TO FINANCE

While women run 40 per cent of businesses in Kiribati, they face more severe challenges in operating them than men. Access to finance is a major supply-side constraint faced by women producers in both rural and urban areas of Kiribati. Women producers usually rely on individual contributions, family loans or village/community loans while starting their business. But they need to borrow from financial institutions

⁴⁴ See also Lievore and Fairbairn-Dunlop (2007).

⁴⁵ Findings based on interviews with Kiritimati-based producers.

such as commercial banks (e.g. ANZ Bank) and the Development Bank of Kiribati for business expansion and development. They also face financial constraints because of the credit culture in Kiribati, where producers sell products mainly by on credit and collect payments later. This adversely affects their cash flow.

Several factors make formal sources of credit highly inaccessible for most women producers and traders in Kiribati, according to the UNCTAD survey. Lack of collateral is the main challenge when applying for bank loans. Land, building an account at the Island Business Deposit (IBD) or KPF as well as third-party security provided by family members are the main means of collateral. In some of the islands such as the Line and Phoenix island groups, all land is owned by the state and is leased to local populations and cannot be used as collateral. Even on islands where private ownership of land is common, such as South Tarawa, women are unlikely to be the main owner of a business, as sole male ownership or customary family ownership are far more frequent. Both factors limit the use of land as collateral by women-owned businesses to access commercial loans. Non-financial, private lenders, who also operate in remote rural areas, charge high interest rates, discouraging potential borrowers.

Another challenge is the lengthy application procedure, which deters potential borrowers from approaching financial institutions for credit. This is especially the case for women in rural areas. Even though banks visit remote islands from time to time, they are not accessible all the time. Following up on the loan approval process, which takes place in South Tarawa, also becomes a tedious task because of the distance. Moreover, women producers, even in urban areas, find the application procedures complicated. For example, small food vendors in North and South Tarawa stated that they were intimidated to visit the bank because they don't understand the requirements and how to meet them.

Finally, the limited variety of loans provided by banks makes certain groups of producers ineligible to apply for commercial loans. For example, the rural loan support scheme administered by the Development Bank of Kiribati (DBK) provides loans in agriculture, fisheries and tourism. Its narrow sectoral target limits its use by rural women given the highly male-intensive employment in agriculture and fisheries, as discussed

in section 5.2. The UNCTAD survey shows that women producers frequently find themselves turned down because their businesses do not fit within the scope of supported activities, as in the case of handicraft production.

Women producers in selected communities might benefit from village bank loans introduced by the government through Island Councils, with over 182 banks across 22 islands in Kiribati. Under the oversight of the Rural Development Unit of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Rural Development (MHARD), the village banks, managed by the village communities, provide small microloans for a range of purposes, both commercial and personal. Well-performing banks can obtain additional funds. Since the inception of the programme in 1995, these banks have demonstrated commendable resilience in competing with commercial banks for several reasons.⁴⁶ First, this mechanism is congruent with the culture and strong community ties, and indeed, communities with stronger social ties perform better. For instance, a common observation among borrowers from village banks is that the social risk of losing face from defaulting on a loan itself acts as a form of security. Therefore, borrowers tend to pay off the loans on time, especially in communities where social ties within the village network or community are stronger. Second, the decision-making framework in this system is much less bureaucratic because loans are decided on by a village or community spokesperson, with no other approval process. Available funds are distributed at the discretion of the spokesperson based on the person's knowledge and familiarity with the borrowers as well as the feasibility of their proposed ventures (ILO, 2006).

Despite its strengths and successes, however, the programme has shown mixed results because a large share of inactive banks did not provide loans to women, both because the spokespersons tend to be men and because their decisions are in line with prevailing gender norms favouring men. Moreover, these loans are sometimes used for immediate needs in the family, such as food and shelter, and not entirely directed at entrepreneurial activities, and this is more the case for female borrowers (ILO, 2006). The UNCTAD survey confirmed that well-managed village banks may constitute a powerful tool for women's economic empowerment, especially because this process circumvents the requirement of showing

⁴⁶ The performance of banks, however, depends on the skills of their managers.

regular income that is needed by formal lending institutions (ILO, 2006). As shown by the experience of women producers on Arorae Island interviewed in the UNCTAD survey, well-targeted seed financing can enhance the involvement of women producers in domestic and international trade, help women build new business outlets, improve market infrastructure and provide further impetus for the development of women-intensive activities.

Kiribati women have proven to have an innovative spirit in terms of borrowing. In areas without village banks, they have developed their own informal banking system known as *Te Karekare* (to take turns) as a way of saving money and providing loans to group members who periodically contribute to a pool of funds (CEDAW, 2019). For instance, in South Tarawa, *Te Karekare* is manifested through a credit scheme, where women pool various resources at their disposal, such as handicrafts, thatches and the like. On a rotational basis, participating women can access these resources up to a fixed amount valued by the producer, and then sell the items at higher prices for profit. Alternatively, on some rural islands, women also use this system to pool human resources for taking turns on providing services for each other to help build thatching houses, produce toddy and other productive activities. Products such as embroidered tops and handicrafts are also made collectively, so that the participant in the roster can sell them with a higher price in the market (ILO, 2006).

6.4. ACCESS TO INPUTS

Both rural and urban producers face difficulties in securing supplies of inputs that are not available locally, such as raw materials or ingredients, as identified by the UNCTAD survey. Rural producers have abundant local raw materials such as coconut leaves and pandanus leaves. However, they face issues when ordering materials from South Tarawa. Deliveries remain far from reliable due to lengthy procurement procedures and consignment losses. Moreover, they face the risk of receiving the wrong material, which is not easy to return. Urban producers face difficulties in the supply of raw materials that are sourced from outer islands. These materials include coconut leaves and pandanus leaves for handicraft producers, coconut oil for virgin coconut oil producers and fresh fish for smoked tuna

producers. With overpopulation and land scarcity, as in South Tarawa, there is competition among producers for the supply of such raw materials. Moreover, the supply of some of the raw materials such as coconut oil is not consistent because of the increase in the copra subsidy, as discussed in section 3.1.

The supply of imported inputs is even a bigger challenge for both rural and urban producers due to the delays in the arrival of orders, according to the UNCTAD survey findings. Foreign materials are ordered through brokers based in South Tarawa and ordering procedures are lengthy. Delays are further amplified by time-consuming clearance procedures at the borders. For example, smoked tuna producers rely on imports of garlic powder, soy sauce and oil, and garment producers use mainly imported materials including cloth, cotton, and paint. Similarly, the aluminium factory in Arorae depends on the sourcing of aluminium raw materials from a New Zealand supplier.

Producers also face price fluctuations in international markets that affect their finances. Strong reliance on imported inputs makes producers in these sectors vulnerable to external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the volume and price of delivered inputs. In rural areas, the arrival of such imported inputs is further delayed because of non-frequent air and sea transportation from South Tarawa. Bad weather and shortage of fuel for boats, which commonly occurs in rural areas, lead to further delays as identified by the UNCTAD survey.

6.5. ACCESS TO INFRASTRUCTURE

Kiribati's highly scattered geographic structure makes infrastructure development and delivery of public services a difficult task. In recent years, the country has remarkably improved the access of the rural population to solar-powered electricity, mainly thanks to the distribution of free hand-held solar lights to all rural households,⁴⁷ and the strong deployment of small solar systems across 21 inhabited islands.⁴⁸ In urban areas, close to 90 per cent of the population has access to electricity services, increasingly generated by solar photovoltaic systems. As a result, electricity generation did not come up among the major concerns of women producers surveyed by UNCTAD in 2019.

⁴⁷ Donation by the Government of Taiwan Province of China.

⁴⁸ Home solar systems were deployed by the state-owned Kiribati Solar Energy Company supported through development assistance from Japan and then the European Union.

The infrastructure gap remains particularly significant for connectivity-related indicators, such as use of the Internet or the number of mobile phone subscriptions. In 2015, 20 per cent of men and 22 per cent of women aged 15 plus used the Internet (KNSO, 2018); 70 per cent of the population lived in areas with mobile network coverage; and the number of mobile cellular subscriptions reached 40 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2017 (ITU, 2018). The completion of connection network via submarine optic cable (planned for 2022) promises further acceleration of connectivity. Although growing rapidly, mobile telephony and Internet connections remain rather pricy owing to the monopolistic character of the market. Moreover, most women producers – and especially those in remote rural areas – are yet to discover the potential of the Internet for their business activities, as it is quite new to them, as expressed by respondents to the UNCTAD survey.

Inadequate market and transport infrastructure prevent many Kiribati businesses from integrating efficiently into supply chains and adversely affect their access to inputs and materials, according to the UNCTAD survey. The lack of sufficient stock of products, common to both rural and urban areas, also prevents them from expanding production and exporting their products. Scarce transport connections negatively affect production planning and decisions regarding volumes to be produced, especially for perishable goods. Domestic air inter-island transport is limited to the Gilbert Islands, with Air Kiribati as the only provider. Sea transport connections are operated by private providers with a poorly equipped fleet, raising safety issues. Ships for inter-island trade are not adapted to the specific features of the goods. For example, they lack freezers for fresh products, and safety rules are not always respected. Land transport is inadequate on many outer islands, and the maintenance of roads remains an issue.

Business space is also an issue for producers and traders in Kiribati as pointed out by respondents to the UNCTAD survey. Rural women typically operate their businesses from home, outside, or on village or church premises. If dedicated business premises exist, they usually fail to meet the basic standards of production sites. For example, in Arorae, women producers of smoked tuna fish operate in a building owned by the fisherman's cooperative. The building, however, has inadequate power and water supply, and does not meet health and safety standards. This adversely affects the production of smoked tuna fish, which has

a high potential for both inter-island and international trade. Generally, most products are stored in the open air, for example in bags, which provides little protection against weather conditions. Established businesses in urban areas either have their own building, or churches provide women producers with working space such as the RAK Centre for KUC women and Itoinigaina Centre for Catholic women. It becomes very difficult to expand production in urban areas because production space is scarce, as on the densely urbanized island of South Tarawa.

6.6. ACCESS TO MODERN PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGIES

Modern technologies would improve the quality and quantity of products, increase productivity, and alleviate health challenges related to the use of outdated tools and processes. For example, working with open fire in smoked fish production and operating older sewing machines and tools in garment production both pose risks to the health of producers, many of whom are women. In rural areas, women have little knowledge of modern technologies and their benefits. Women in urban areas are more knowledgeable about modern technologies and want to seize the opportunity to upgrade their production. Examples of such technologies include slithering or pressing machines for handicraft producers, modern ovens for smoked fish producers, sophisticated cutting and sewing machines for garment producers, and new tools for swift preparation of raw materials – a highly labour-intensive and time-consuming task – for all producers.

Most women producers in urban and rural areas rely on traditional technologies in Kiribati. The high cost of acquiring modern production technologies, often of foreign origin, and difficulties with their use, maintenance and repair are the major inhibiting factors cited by UNCTAD survey respondents. Urban-based producers in the garment industry, for example, procured sophisticated cutting machines that are an upgrade from manual cutting. Maintenance and repair became a major problem as spare parts had to be procured overseas and local technicians lacked the knowledge on how to fix the machines. Moreover, the operation of modern tools and machines requires upgraded knowledge about manufacturing processes and vocational training, which are often unavailable. Using foreign manuals also necessitates proficiency in foreign languages and good command of technical vocabulary.

Women's Associations play an important role in overcoming the constraints in accessing modern production technologies. Through procurement and sharing of modern tools among their members, the associations help improve women producers' productivity and mitigate health and safety issues when using traditional tools, according to the UNCTAD survey.

6.7. ACCESS TO TRAINING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Most women producers and traders from all age groups cited limited access to training and skill development programmes as a major supply-side obstacle. Insufficient entrepreneurial skills often prevent them from expanding their businesses in terms of both product variety and market size.

Rural producers tend to have underdeveloped networks outside their islands and have limited business skills. As a result, they keep on with traditional production and marketing methods similar to those of their ancestors. This negatively affects the potential growth of their businesses beyond subsistence levels. Women Interest Workers (WIW) representatives interviewed by UNCTAD confirmed that women ask for advice and assistance from the staff at the Island Council, including the Mayor, Council Members and the WIW on how to carry out a broad variety of business-related activities, including managerial decisions. Women producers in urban areas face similar impediments, particularly if they operate an informal business. *"I have no idea what business management is – I just prepare the food and sell,"* said a Tarawa-based food producer. Formal established businesses, such as those in garment and virgin coconut oil production, have developed management skills over time through self-learning and training programmes organized by the government and the Chamber of Commerce, but they still need to keep up with new

management styles. Women producers engaging in group ventures also face issues with collective decision-making and efficient management.

The government provides technical assistance, marketing assistance, training programmes and workshops for women producers in a wide range of areas including garments, handicrafts, smoked fish, and canned fish production. Women producers find these programmes useful because they learn new techniques and gain skills. At the same time, the lack of continuity, infrequency of training activities and absence of one-to-one interaction with trainers significantly prevent women from getting the full benefits expected from such programmes. As a result, women interviewed in the UNCTAD survey were able to acquire and apply new skills and knowledge only to a limited extent.

The UNCTAD survey shows that women producers in urban areas generally benefit from better access to international networks and export-related services. However, most of them lack the marketing skills necessary to enter international markets and have limited knowledge about packaging and labelling requirements and other aspects of international trade. Moreover, women producers in both rural and urban areas depend on governmental support or international development funds to participate in trade missions or trade fairs, which otherwise would not be affordable.

Lack of production planning skills and insufficient production capacity, in general, impede women businesses' ability to export, since many businesses are not able to produce the volumes requested by international buyers. Gathering into cooperatives, associations or larger groups helps address this issue. Nevertheless, as observed during the UNCTAD survey, even when they are assembled in cooperatives or larger groups, women-owned businesses sometimes lack the consensus capacity, which has a negative impact on the operability of such a group.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of desk research and the UNCTAD field survey, this section presents a series of policy recommendations that revolve around three objectives that aim to: (i) help address the main constraints faced by women producers and traders, (ii) promote women's participation in both inter-island and international trade, and (iii) ultimately contribute to women's economic empowerment in Kiribati.

Legal and institutional frameworks for gender equality

The government of Kiribati has taken important steps towards establishing legal and institutional frameworks for gender equality, as discussed in section 4. The government's strong commitment to gender equality and women's economic empowerment is, however, weakened by the ad hoc and scattered character of interventions and their limited duration. As an overall approach, there is a need to follow a more inclusive process in the design, development, and implementation of capacity-building programmes for women producers/traders, and in the legal and institutional frameworks for gender equality. This implies the need for close collaboration among main stakeholders involved in the process, including national and local government representatives, beneficiary groups (e.g. women's cooperatives, women's producer organizations), international development organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).⁴⁹ The government could also make a careful assessment of priority areas for intervention while designing and implementing such policy instruments and allocating government funds.

In terms of immediate steps that could be taken, the government could make the necessary reforms in legal and institutional frameworks for gender equality. For example, there is a need to prohibit discrimination in access to credit based on gender and provide equal ownership rights to immovable property, both of which are critical for women producers and traders. The government could introduce paid maternity leave of at least 14 weeks, fully covered by the government, paid leave for fathers, and parental leave policies to support women's labour force participation in the formal sector

in order to complement measures to increase formal sector jobs, as will be discussed later in this section.

Additionally, the government could remove the marriage certificate requirements for women when registering their businesses. It could also fix the gendered language in the Registration of Business Names Act of 1988. Finally, the government could work with financial institutions to promote the registering of property in joint names as a default option (ADB, 2018). The GEWD framework provides the opportunity to tackle the complex set of issues faced by women producers and traders in a holistic way and could be used as a basis for building collaboration among the relevant stakeholders listed above.

Regarding transforming discriminatory social norms, Island Councils could involve community leaders and male members to develop a dialogue process through awareness-raising campaigns on gender equality, similar to the initiatives targeting gender-based violence. UNCTAD survey findings suggest that women's engagement in income-generating activities may also help shift the traditional perception of gender roles and stereotypes held by both men and women towards a more gender-balanced point. Male advocacy proved to be an efficient tool in facilitating dialogue with men across many PICs, including Kiribati, Fiji and Tonga. Extending the portfolio of male advocates beyond gender-based violence could be instrumental to promote positive change in the perception of women's ability to carry out business activities, especially in rural areas. However, given the significant share of subsistence economic activities in Kiribati and the role women in them, it is equally important to introduce broad-based gender awareness initiatives regardless of the economic position of women in the economy.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have led to a higher incidence of domestic violence. This is exacerbated by poorer chances of reporting, either because of the lockdown or because perpetrators are unemployed and at home. This necessitates innovation in community-level crisis response and makes a strong case for adoption of online and mobile technology for women to report domestic violence as well as to obtain support services. However, given the low penetration

⁴⁹ An example is Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which supports various programmes for gender equality in Kiribati through the Pacific Women initiative (Pacific Women, 2020b).

of the Internet and mobile phones, especially in rural areas, traditional reporting mechanisms should immediately be expanded beyond the police force and use women's groups, producer organizations and NGOs as intermediaries to expand the reach of victims to support mechanisms.

Finally, climate change disproportionately affects Kiribati, as has been highlighted in this report. Women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men because they rely on natural resources for their livelihood to a greater extent. They are also in a disadvantaged position in coping with the adverse impacts of climate change due to the various gendered constraints they face in economic and social life. In Kiribati, it is necessary to effectively implement the existing protection laws for sustainable management of coastal fisheries and marine resources that are affected by climate change. Climate change resilience programmes need to be developed, taking into account differences between atolls (Otiuea et al., 2019). A gender perspective needs to be incorporated into these programmes to address the gender inequalities of the effects of climate change.

Training and skill development programmes for production and trade

Access to training and skill development programmes is a major area of concern for women producers in Kiribati, as discussed in section 6.7. In order to finance training programmes, the government could prioritize funding for training programmes that target disadvantaged groups, including women, youth and the disabled in the budgets of ministries and local governments. The government could also build long-term cooperation with international development organizations to finance training and skill development programmes for disadvantaged groups.

Besides the financing issue, it is equally important to improve the efficiency of such programmes. One issue is related to the design of their content. Gender-value-chain analyses could be carried out in key economic sectors including fisheries, copra, handicraft and garments to identify how to integrate women in inter-island and international trade to a greater extent and in higher value-added segments of the value chains. Additionally, a needs-based assessment could be carried out through consultations with women's

groups, producer organizations, cooperatives, NGOs, and other stakeholders in targeted sectors. For example, handicrafts, garments, fish products such as tuna jerky, and coconut oil emerge as relevant economic activities for women in Kiribati in terms of trading capacity, so these sectors could be targeted initially to carry out such assessments. The content of training and skill development programmes could then be tailored accordingly.

It is also important to deliver training and skill development programmes on a regular basis and introduce follow-up activities to assess their efficacy. Women's time and mobility constraints should also be taken into consideration in order to increase their participation. As shown by the experience of rural women producers in the handicrafts and garment sectors, skill development programmes that are updated and delivered on a regular basis help women producers improve existing products and develop new ones. A diverse range of products are more easily marketed in both domestic and international markets. The experience of other developing regions also shows that combining training programmes on business management with ones on trade rules and business formalization procedures encourages women to shift their business from subsistence to sustainability.⁵⁰ Training activities delivered to women's groups or associations on export and import procedures are instrumental in the search for new markets and for understanding trade procedures and non-tariff measures.

It is also possible to help women shift to a new food value chain that has the potential to support both income generation and household wellbeing through increased nutrition and better health outcomes. Seaweed farming is such an example. The move from copra to seaweed farming as an export commodity was carried out in Tabuaeran (Fanning Island), part of the Line Islands. This transition was successful and substantially improved the wellbeing of the population in the area. Similarly, a series of peer-led seaweed training workshops were held in South Tarawa in 2018 and 2019 to provide women with knowledge, skills, and motivational support to participate in the seaweed supply chain, from harvesting, processing, and marketing to consumption. Women showed high interest in seaweed-related activities and pointed

⁵⁰ Such as an UNCTAD project on women in informal cross-border trade in Malawi, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia in 2016–2019.

to health and nutrition improvements for themselves and their families as the key motivators, followed by developing and sharing new skills and the potential for income generation. They also expressed the need for further training in seaweed harvesting, processing, and recipe creation as well as social support (Swanepoel et al., 2020). Seaweed and other local food products could be supported through training and favourable loan programmes to ease access to resources.

Subsistence production is an integral part of Kiribati's economy and supports men's and women's livelihoods, as has been discussed in this report. Besides targeting income-generating activities, such training programmes could be broadened to revive interest in traditional knowledge and preservation techniques in order to promote consumption of nutritious local foods and fish. Training could be provided in areas such as preparation and preservation of traditional food products and protection of other local products. This would be useful to meet the nutritional needs of the society and to reduce dependence on imported foods in Kiribati. It would also not undermine the subsistence economy during the transition process to income-generating activities. Targeted programmes could be developed to support value chain development in selected priority nutrient-dense crops and fish over the longer term.

Policies that encourage healthier local food choices could also help address nutrition and food security concerns in Kiribati. For example, the 2014 excise taxes introduced for unhealthy food items such as sugar-sweetened beverages were instrumental toward this end. Awareness-raising initiatives, subsidies and product labelling to support local food production could also be implemented. The local governance structures and social networks could be used to improve health and nutrition-related behaviours. For example, village welfare groups, which are community self-help bodies selected by community leaders in the *maneaba* (i.e. social and community hall) system of Kiribati governance, could be influential in pushing for behavioural change in production and consumption decisions regarding the selection of local food items over imported ones through community gatherings both in *maneabas* and in other venues (Kodish et al., 2019).⁵¹

Access to inputs and technology

Besides targeted training and skill development programmes, the government needs to ease producers' access to the inputs and technology required to meet product standards demanded by domestic and international customers. The government could provide the necessary inputs and tools to women producers in targeted sectors through favourable loan programmes and deliver extension services in partnership with NGOs and international development organizations. In the case of coconut, the government needs to address the distortive effects of the copra subsidy on the production of higher-value-added coconut products such as virgin coconut oil and coconut sugar, which have high potential for trade. This could be done through capacity-building programmes that support women producers of coconut oil, coconut sugar and other higher-value-added products in partnership with international development organizations. Women's Associations could be supported in their efforts on procurement and the sharing of modern production technologies through user training sessions and supplier connections.

Access to market information, networks, and certification schemes

Women producers' limited knowledge of market access requirements could be addressed through awareness-raising campaigns, delivered in the Kiribati language and tailored to their literacy level. These may include brochures, leaflets or publications focusing on products made by women. The UNCTAD guide to export to Australia and New Zealand for selected products produced by women in PICs, for example, includes detailed information for exporters of mats made of pandanus leaves, virgin oil and shell-based handicrafts. Since broadcasting is the only mass media that reaches all islands, inclusion of such information in women's programmes on Kiribati radio would assure its dissemination to women across all island groups. Over the longer term, as access to the Internet and mobile phones expands more broadly, other reliable means of information such as trade portals, websites, social media and mobile applications could be used to disseminate market

⁵¹ *Maneaba* (social and community hall) is the centre of community life in Kiribati, where community members discuss and resolve issues of political, social, economic and religious life under the leadership of the *Unimwane* (elected elders) and Christian leaders. It hosts festivities and provides accommodation, storage and safe refuge from violence. See <https://visitkiribati.travel/about/people-culture/>.

information. Producer organizations and cooperatives could facilitate women's access to information through these channels.

Women's Business Fora organized by governments and women's organizations provide useful platforms for showcasing women's success stories and the exchange of information.⁵² Women's fairs such as Women Expo 2018 organized by the MWYSSA represent a convenient platform for exchanging experiences, showcasing and comparing products, and networking. Collaborative networks can help producers reach volumes requested by clients abroad, improve their production and make them export-ready. Regular repetition of women-centred events would contribute to the viability of such networks.

Participation in business-to-business meetings or trade missions abroad for export-ready producers proved to be instrumental for the establishment of foreign contacts and output channels. Financial support could be provided to selected women business associations to attend such missions. A gradual shift from ad hoc assistance by the MCIC to coordinated and targeted support programmes provided to selected products with high export potential such as processed fish, organic coconut oil, garments, handicrafts, etc. would benefit large numbers of women producers. The same applies to linking Kiribati women producer groups to foreign markets through directly established export channels.

For example, the Nei Nibarara Group, even though it turned out to be unsuccessful due to managerial issues, was initially helpful to women producers of home decoration products in finding demand for their products in New Zealand. The Nei Nibarara Groups example shows that complementing direct export channels with training on managerial and other business skills is essential for the ultimate success of exporters. It is also important to fully examine why the Nei Nibarara Group ceased operation. Such collaborations between international development organizations and national entities appear to need to be longer term, with the transition to becoming a self-funded body made gradually. Lessons to be learnt from this and other similar experiences are invaluable for the development of more successful and long-term women supplier groups.

Certification schemes such as Fair Trade have had many positive effects on women's economic empowerment,

as in the case of coffee producers around the world. Such schemes could be introduced and enhanced in sectors central to women's employment in Kiribati such as handicrafts, coconut oil, smoked fish and garments. The introduction of production certification schemes may boost sales opportunities, especially in international markets. The success story of Samoan organic virgin coconut oil produced by rural women for use in the Body Shop cosmetic products shows that production corresponding to organic standards can tap into large markets.

Simplifying trade and business formalization procedures

Business-friendly regulations that simplify procedures and reduce costs of business formalization would promote the upswing of the formal private sector and provide more opportunities for women's economic empowerment. Cooperatives could be instrumental toward this end. The experiences of existing cooperatives could be examined closely to identify the gaps and improve their functioning.

Streamlining of licensing procedures would make business registration more attractive for women who typically carry diverse income-earning activities and offer a broader variety of products. Availability of single licenses issued by Island Councils throughout the year would therefore lead to significant reduction in licensing-related costs for women. Moreover, streamlining licensing fees and by-laws across town councils on Tarawa, especially for businesses that operate across multiple council areas, would reduce the regulatory requirements for women who are engaged in more than one economic activity. Tonga serves as a model for such streamlining. Island government services hubs, Internet cafes and bank branches could be used to enable business registration and payment of associated fees (ADB, 2018).

Enhanced cooperation of agencies in border and other export and import control points, as outlined in the Trade Policy Framework, would help streamline export procedures towards the ultimate introduction of a single window system. This would improve cost-effectiveness and competitiveness of exports as well as trade transparency for producers. The example of the Solomon Islands shows that the introduction of automated customs operations together with more effective work of border agencies result in higher

⁵² Such as the Women's Business Forum in the Cook Islands held in March 2017 with financial aid from AusAid.

revenues despite a decrease in import duty rates. Remarkably, the coronavirus pandemic has provided additional impetus to gradual introduction of electronic procedures, which are now available for incoming vessels. Further expansion is subject to improvements in the availability and accessibility of the Internet. Simplification of import procedures would, in turn, help address supply failures of raw materials. Some steps have been taken toward this end, such as the PACER-Plus Project for implementation of the Pacific Trade and Customs Harmonisation Project, which was launched in November 2019 to help the 9PICs including Kiribati tackle challenges related to business formalization and trading.⁵³

Streamlining access to finance

Lack of collateral in access to finance is a primary issue for both formal and informal women businesses. Policymakers need to introduce solutions to overcome this barrier through, for example, loan programmes that ease borrowing conditions in female-intensive sectors with export potential (e.g. handicrafts, coconut oil, smoked fish, garments). Existing loan programmes such as the rural loan support scheme provided through the DBK need to extend beyond agriculture and cover women-intensive sectors in manufacturing (e.g. handicrafts, garments) and services. Improving financial literacy and simplifying banking procedures to open a bank account and apply for loans are also needed to overcome the disincentive among women producers to approach formal financial institutions.

The experience of microfinance organizations working in the Pacific implies that structured programmes with clear rules, training and guidance help stimulate the growth of women's businesses.⁵⁴ The introduction of microfinancing solutions, gradual widespread of M-PAiSA online payments,⁵⁵ and diffusion of financial training such as MoneyMinded would further ease the transition of Kiribati women from subsistence to income-generating production.⁵⁶ Such electronic solutions are particularly relevant in a geographically scattered country like Kiribati. However, this first

requires the spread of communication infrastructure across the islands.

Village Bank loans proved to be effective in certain areas in Kiribati to overcome issues with accessing bank loans, as discussed in section 6.3. Policymakers should improve the functioning of these entities and ensure their effective management. Encouraging higher levels of female participation through initiatives such as a quota system could ease rural women producers' access to loans. This is because banks make loan decisions in South Tarawa, which makes it hard for rural loan applicants to follow up. Complementing the Village Bank loans with financial literacy training as well as tracking progress of proposed businesses could counteract the tendency among borrowers to use loans for immediate family needs such as food and shelter. Given the close affiliation of the spokesperson with the overall community as well as borrowers, they could track the progress on proposed ventures and disbursed loans.

Additionally, the *Te Karekare* system could be supported with financial literacy programmes to improve the profitability of women's business activities. Insofar that these groups already exist, a revolving loan fund concept could also be introduced. A revolving loan fund runs on a fixed amount of initial funding that is replenished by loan repayments and expanded through interest payments. Seed fund programmes to support women in business, as in the case of Arorae Island, could also be expanded across all islands.

Improving transport and trade infrastructure

The Kiribati Trade Policy Framework outlines the measures needed to support inter-island trade (MCIC, 2017). Improving the connectivity and accessibility of shipping services is the key challenge to facilitate international and inter-island trade in Kiribati. This is also important to ensure uninterrupted supplies of inputs. Storage, processing and packaging facilities are needed to reduce post-harvest loss and help producers meet the product standards set

⁵³ The project aims to provide technical assistance to improve business registration, customs procedures and boost cross-border trade. UNCTAD is supporting Kiribati to modernize its customs and to build a national single window environment through its ASYCUDA programme. See <https://trade4devnews.enhancedif.org/en/news/kiribati-sets-sights-overcoming-hurdles-ecommerce> (accessed at on 20 October 2020).

⁵⁴ One example is SPBD, operating in the South Pacific.

⁵⁵ Offered by Vodaphone Kiribati.

⁵⁶ MoneyMinded is a partnership of ANZ bank and the United Nations Pacific Financial Inclusion Programme (PFIP).

by traders and processors. Government, together with international development organizations, can develop existing business spaces and introduce new shared storage and business spaces in designated economic zones to promote economies of scale. For example, storage facilities such as fish centres or ice-making machines for marine products and processing and packaging facilities for fruits, garments, and other similar products could increase productivity significantly and support inter-island and international trade capacity of producers, both men and women. Training representatives of producer associations and cooperatives on supply chain management and marketing and introducing awareness-raising programmes on government support programmes on inter-island trade would help build linkages between producers and potential customers. Investments to improve inter-island transport and information and communications technology infrastructure are critical for the development of inter-island trade.

Internet access also needs to be expanded to make the use of electronic trade and business solutions widespread. E-commerce has the potential to help women businesses integrate into international markets because it has fewer entry barriers. It is also highly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The development of e-commerce is highly restricted by the lack of adequate infrastructure and a regulatory environment in the short term, but could be developed in parallel with infrastructure development over the long term with the support of international development organizations.

Women market vendors need to be involved in decisions on market infrastructure planning to ensure that market facilities are gender-responsive. This would involve sanitary equipment and storage facilities to reflect the specific needs of products manufactured and handled by women. Experience from the Women's Markets for Change (M4C) project in Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands shows that the inclusion of women vendors in infrastructure planning has a positive impact on women's inclusion in local economies and their safety. In Arorae atoll, a dialogue between women producers and the local council materialized resulted in the establishment of temporary market facility funded by the council that could be rented by local women producers to offer their products to visitors arriving on cruise ships. Similar structures could be introduced in other atolls.

Strengthening women groups, producer associations and cooperatives

Strengthening of women groups, producer organizations and cooperatives is critical to help small-scale women producers increase their bargaining power in the marketing of products, purchase inputs and gain better access to technology, as discussed in section 6.6. Partnering with AMAK and benefitting from its networks and expertise especially in remote rural areas is a key prerequisite for strengthening the capacity of rural women's organization to coordinate activities of women producers. The government could increase the number of women's groups and help them meet their organizational needs. It could train staff of such organizations on technical and business-related basic skills who would in turn train their members on production management, pricing and marketing of their products.

The Ministry of Women, Youth and Social Affairs could host an inter-ministerial initiative to support women especially in the subsistence sector through technical training, entrepreneurship skill development, gender awareness programmes, and leadership and self-confidence support initiatives. Partnerships could be built with organizations such as Pacific Trade Invest and the Pacific Islands Private Sector Organization to disseminate information about potential foreign demand for goods produced by women, quality standards to be met and getting goods to the market. This trading hub could also become a platform to share information on financial literacy, business advisory services and business formalization (ADB, 2018).

Use of statistics and assessment tools for gender-sensitive trade policy

Trade agreements should introduce a gender perspective across all of the issues they address, in addition to including a specific chapter on gender and trade for gender-specific issues. Governments should systematically implement ex ante and ex post gender assessments of trade agreements. In this regard, UNCTAD (2017) introduced the Trade and Gender Toolbox as an ex ante gender impact assessment tool for trade agreements. Through these analytical tools, it becomes possible to identify the measures needed to increase the expected benefits from trade and/or address any adverse effect that may occur. Ex post assessment would help identify any realized adverse effects and contribute to the development of

compensatory measures such as training programmes for displaced workers, producer support programmes in export sectors, and similar programmes.

Sex-disaggregated data is a prerequisite to making use of such assessment tools to render trade policy gender-sensitive. The Kiribati government, in partnership with international development organizations and international organizations such as the United Nations, should collect more-detailed sex-disaggregated data on economic sectors, including the informal and subsistence sectors, which are central to Kiribati's economy. Qualitative studies on how gender relations influence economic outcomes in both productive and reproductive spheres of economic life should also be carried out in selected sectors. UNCTAD (2019c) provides a review of both the available assessment frameworks and the data requirements for such analyses on gender and trade. The government could use these tools in the design, implementation and assessment stages of policymaking and make revisions as needed.

Gender-sensitive response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Women's participation in decision-making processes is critical for the implementation of gender-sensitive response measures to the COVID-19 pandemic. Collection of gender disaggregated data is essential for the evaluation and tailoring of response measures. Programmes for job retention (e.g. wage subsidies and/or social security and other fiscal payment relief) and income-support schemes (e.g. unemployment benefits) could mitigate impacts of the pandemic on the formal workforce. Income support, cash transfers or special credit lines could be instrumental in supporting own-account producers as well as informal workers, especially because most prominent social protection programmes, such as the provident fund and employer-provided fringe benefits, are available only to those employed in the formal sector.

Additional monetary and fiscal measures could help prevent closures of enterprises. These might include, for example, sectoral funds, social security and fiscal payment exemptions or deferrals, fast and subsidized loans, relaxation of regulations, and taxes on targeted sectors. As of 2 July 2020, no fiscal or monetary measures had been introduced in Kiribati to cope with the economic impact of the pandemic.⁵⁷ Finally, the provision of social protection from non-state actors could be crucial to fill the gaps in social assistance and protection in Kiribati, especially as it pertains to the limitations in public finance. For instance, churches in Kiribati have strong ties with women in the community, who contribute a lot of their time and assistance to these churches. In the past, the Kiribati Protestant Church has had a programme to use a portion of its discretionary funds to help women with cervical cancer to travel overseas. Moreover, the Catholic Church has long supported the crisis centre for women escaping domestic violence (AusAID, 2012). This could be encouraged across other churches with targeted beneficiaries who have specifically been impacted by COVID-19.

The government could also prioritize women-owned enterprises in public procurement. As a longer-term goal, infrastructure programmes that target specific sectors, delivery of public services, education and training programmes, and capacity-building programmes that facilitate access to finance, production inputs and market information should all incorporate a gender perspective in order to address the specific constraints faced by women. Finally, policy instruments such as hotlines and abuse reporting centres through both police centres and women's groups need to be introduced in the short term to help the victims of gender-based violence, which has increased in many countries during the pandemic. Enactment and full enforcement of laws against gender-based violence should become a priority as a longer-term solution.

⁵⁷ See International Monetary Fund, "Policy Responses to COVID-19," available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#K>.

ANNEX I: UNCTAD 2019 SURVEY

Main purpose

During the first semester of 2019, UNCTAD conducted a stakeholder survey facilitated by the national consultant that aimed to:

- Examine the income-generating activities carried out by rural and urban women producers
- Assess women's business expansion and product diversification strategies, if any
- Identify the challenges faced by women producers wishing to expand and diversify their production and export their products
- Develop policy recommendations to help women producers overcome the challenges faced.

Selection of study sites

In close collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Cooperatives of Kiribati (MCIC), UNCTAD identified four islands for the study: South Tarawa, Kiritimati (Christmas), Arorae and Makin. The final selection reflected differences between more developed urban areas and traditional rural areas, as well as geographic diversity. Both northern islands,

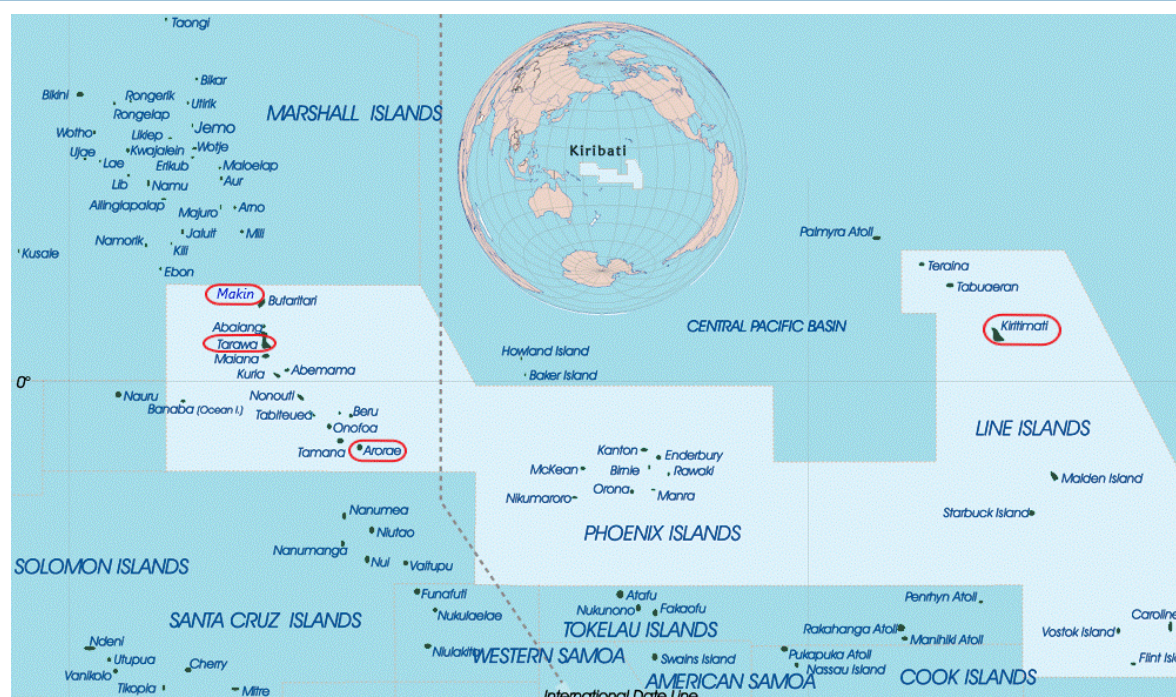
which benefit from better conditions for agriculture, more rainfall and richer soils, and southern islands, which have poorer soils and harsh conditions for agriculture, are represented.

Survey method

The survey was undertaken through focal group discussions and one-on-one individual interviews. Focal group discussions were used for discussions at the community level with representatives of local women's groups, villages and church groups. Altogether, eight focal group discussions were organized in order to collect views from different women groups and communities on Arorae, Makin and Kiritimati islands. Individual interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, such as private businesses (both formal and informal), government ministries, NGOs, local chapters of Chambers of Commerce, and Island Councils.

Focal group discussions and individual interviews were facilitated by the national consultant, assisted by a local Women Interest Worker (WIW) and an Assistant Social Worker Officer (ASWO), if necessary.

Figure A.1:
UNCTAD survey sites



Main survey sites

The focal group discussions and individual interviews took place during the first semester of 2019. Altogether, UNCTAD collected responses from 82 individuals. The list of participants is presented at the end of this annex.

Primary research areas

Focal group discussions centred on the occupation and economic sector profiles of local women producers and their practices, and on the challenges faced by women when engaging in income-earning activities, diversifying their production and/or engaging in inter-island and/or international trade.

Individual interviews served to obtain insights on income-earning activities undertaken by women, challenges faced by women producers, and government support provided to them. Where possible, the survey focused on differences in activities of rural and urban women.

Survey limitations

As the study was conducted on 4 out of 24 inhabited islands of Kiribati, the transferability of findings on other islands might be limited due to possible island-specific sociocultural and economic differences. Nevertheless, this limitation has been mitigated through careful selection of islands, including atolls belonging to the inner and outer islands, urban and rural areas, and different island groups. The four islands included in the study account for more than 50 per cent of the Kiribati population.

The survey sample is relatively small, and the findings are thus indicative. This limitation was addressed through careful selection of respondents, making sure that all key stakeholders are included.

LIST OF STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEWED

IDI/FG	ORGANIZATION	DESIGNATION
IDI1	Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Cooperatives (MCIC) (Kiritimati Branch)	Officer in Charge
IDI2	MCIC (Kiritimati Branch)	Chamber of Commerce
IDI3	MCIC (Kiritimati Branch)	Business Promotion Centre
IDI4	MCIC (Kiritimati Branch)	Business Promotion Centre
IDI5	MCIC (Kiritimati Branch)	Business Promotion Centre
IDI6	Ministry of Women, Youth and Social Affairs (MWYSSA) (Tarawa)	Women's Division
IDI7	Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resource Development (MFMRD) (Tarawa)	MFMRD
IDI8	MFMRD (Tarawa)	MFMRD
IDI9	Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) (Tarawa)	Senior Assistant Local Government Officer
	Makin Island Councils	
IDI10	Makin	Mayor
IDI11	Makin	Clerk
IDI12	Makin	Women Interest Worker (WIW)
IDI13	Makin	Assistant Social Worker Officer (ASWO)
	Arorae Island Councils	
IDI14	Arorae	Mayor
IDI15	Arorae	Vice Mayor
IDI16	Arorae	Officer in Charge/Clerk
IDI17	Arorae	WIW
IDI18	Arorae	ASWO
IDI19	Arorae	Treasurer
	Kiritimati Island Council	
IDI20	Kiritimati	Clerk
IDI21	Kiritimati	ICW
IDI22	Kiritimati	ASWO
IDI23	Kiritimati	Councillor Poland Village

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

	ORGANIZATION	DESIGNATION
IDI24	Aia Maea Ainen Kiribati (AMAK)	Coordinator for AMAK Council of Women
IDI25	Kiribati Chamber of Commerce & Industries (KCCI)	
FG01	ARORAE: Representatives from villages/wards	
	Bonnano	
	Kekeiaki	
	Karemrem	
	Kaneati	
	Mweraoi	
	Bouakinna	
	Kataia	
	Semegali	
FG02	ARORAE: Representatives from women's groups	
	RAK	
	Totaieti	
	Totaieti	
	Totaieti	
	Totaieti	
	Baba n aine	
	Baba n aine	
	Baba n aine	
	Baba n aine	
FG03	KIRITMATI: Representatives from women's/church Group	
	Nei Baneawa Group	Itoingaina
	Nei Baneawa Group	Nei Banikai (Bahai)
	Nei Baneawa Group	Reita Ainen Kiribati - Kiribati Uniting Church women body (RAK - KUC)
	Women Councillor	Councillor
	Women Councillor	Councillor
FG04	Young Women Group	Latter Day Saint Church (Mormon) (LDS)
		Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church (SDA)
		Kiribati Christian Youth (KCY)
		Youth Christian Leadership (YCL)

FG05	MAKIN – Representatives from women's/ community/village groups	
	Makin	Irekenrao
	Makin	RAK
	Makin	Reita Aine Boretetanti - Protestant Church women group (RAB)
	Makin	Itoingaina
FG06	Makin	Atatanikarawa Ward
	Makin	Kekeiaki Ward
	Makin	Teuarereke Ward
	Makin	Uninteang Ward
	Makin	Ueentemanguroro Ward
	Makin	Temoanibwai Ward
	Makin	YCL
	Makin	Mexico Ward
	Makin	Wirara Ward

PRIVATE SECTOR

	ORGANIZATION	DESIGNATION
	TARAWA	
IDI26	Dinaai Handicraft	Handicraft supplier
IDI27	Rereiti Garment	Owner Rereiti Garment
IDI28	Virgin oil	
IDI29	Tuna jerky producer	
IDI30	Roadside vendor	Selling cooked food
IDI31	House-to-house vendor	Selling local produce
IDI32	Bairiki market	Selling local produce
IDI33	Bikenibeu market	Selling local produce
IDI34	Itoingaina Christmas Island	Itoingaina
IDI35	Itoingaina Tarawa	
	ARORAE	
FG07	Arorae Fisherman Cooperatives (5)	
FG08	Arorae Aluminium (4)	
	CHRISTMAS	
IDI36	Ale Lanto Handicraft	Handicraft supplier
IDI37	Hotel service	Hotel owner
IDI38	Restaurant/Local food	Business, member of Chamber of Commerce
IDI39	Peter & Sons Ltd	General Manager

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gender@unctad.org
<http://unctad.org/gender>