

Ko e kakai, ‘ikai ko e palopalema **People, not problems:**

The social impacts of temporary
labour mobility in Tonga



Australian Government





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Acronyms

AE	Approved employer
ATR	Agreement to Recruit
CLO	Country liaison officer
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EBA	Enterprise bargaining agreement
FWO	Fair Work Ombudsman
GBV	Gender-based violence
HOM	Head of Mission
LHC	Labour hire company
LSU	Labour sending unit
MBIE	Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
MIA	Ministry of Internal Affairs
MIS	Management information system
NGO	Non-government organisation
OED	Overseas Employment Division
PALM	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility
PIC	Pacific island country
PLF	Pacific Labour Facility
PLS	Pacific Labour Scheme
RSE	Recognised Seasonal Employer
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
SWP	Seasonal Worker Programme



Summary

Since 2022 there have been growing public opinions about the social impacts of specific types of labour mobility — namely the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) and Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) schemes. Reported social issues primarily include, but are not limited to, extra-marital affairs, gender-based violence (including domestic and family violence and financial abuse), worker disengagement and negative impacts on children left behind. Civil society organisations in Tonga have identified an increase in family members of PALM and RSE scheme workers seeking support.

The governments of Tonga and Australia identified the need for country specific research to identify and understand the social impacts (positive and negative) of labour mobility on families and communities in Tonga. The New Zealand Government also requested inclusion of RSE in the study scope. A further objective of the study is to enhance the benefits and minimise the potential risks of labour mobility through program improvement and potential policy reform.

The study – Ko e kakai, ‘ikai ko e palopalema (People, not problems): The Social Impacts of Labour Mobility in Tonga – was conducted jointly by the Ministry of Internal Affairs Overseas Employment Division (MIA-OED) and the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF). A research team of three Tongan and two Australian researchers conducted talanoa with 302 participants including family members of labour mobility households, returned RSE and PALM scheme participants, PALM scheme workers in Australia, Tongan Government representatives, church leaders, town and district officers in Tonga, and non-government organisation (NGO) representatives. Data was collected in all major island areas of Tonga and three states in Australia including Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia.

The study answers three questions regarding the social impacts of temporary labour migration in Tonga under the PALM and RSE schemes. These questions focused on understanding what is happening, why it is happening and to what extent the PALM and RSE labour mobility is a contributing factor.

The study identifies six key findings on the social impacts of labour mobility:

- 1. Life events that happen during labour mobility are often confused with social impacts, but they are not the same thing.** Not everything that happens to someone while participating in labour mobility is a social impact.
- 2. PALM and RSE scheme participants experience three key opportunities associated with labour mobility including (1) improved socio-economic status (2) positive changes in family and intimate partner relationships (3) minor improvements in gender equality.**
- 3. PALM and RSE scheme participants experience five key challenges associated with labour mobility including (1) coping behaviours (2) relationship stress (3) care arrangements for children (4) negative work experiences leading to scheme disengagement (5) gender discrimination.**
- 4. Overall, the main positive impact of labour mobility for Tongan participants is improved socio-economic status. The main negative impact is uneven labour mobility gains primarily due to gender discrimination and inadequate support services.**
- 5. The current focus – particularly in the Tongan media – on family breakdown and separation as a widespread impact caused by labour mobility is not supported by the study data.**

6. Social impacts occur due to a wide range of factors that are present before, during and after labour mobility. However, aspects of labour mobility may exacerbate the severity of challenges (leading to negative social impacts) for workers and their families when support and connection are absent or inadequate. When support structures are present and adequate, positive social impacts are enhanced.

In sum, PALM and RSE scheme participation does not directly cause social impacts, but it may exacerbate challenges and minimise opportunities when support systems are lacking or inadequate.

Scheme participants and their families encounter a range of opportunities and challenges throughout labour mobility. These opportunities and challenges do not occur in a vacuum of labour mobility. A key theme in the data is that of personal choice and agency – specifically, the choice to engage in or refrain from certain behaviours and activities, including how people seek help when they need it.

The term *fakafo'ituitui* ('it's a personal choice') was used frequently by participants to refer to how and why people make decisions, within the context of their connection and support structures. This framework of connection and support includes respect, obligation and internal/intrinsic motivation at the spiritual, community and individual levels.

When the conditions of labour mobility are such that workers are isolated, unsupported and stressed, people are more likely to engage in repeat behaviours that negatively

impact family members and coworkers. These conditions may include group conflict, overcrowded accommodation where workers are housed in large mixed gender dormitory accommodation far from transport and services, or approved employers who stay at arm's length from group conflict and risky behaviours when they occur outside work.¹

The current focus on solving problems should shift to supporting people through a holistic Pacific-Australia (and Pacific-New Zealand) community of care. The study recommends a people-centred approach to minimise the risks of labour mobility. Specific recommendations as outlined in the report include enhancing support for families and returned workers in Tonga, and more accessible and gender-sensitive support for PALM and RSE scheme participants in Australia and New Zealand.

¹ Despite worker welfare obligations set out in the Deed and Guidelines.

Introduction

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme allows eligible Australian businesses to hire workers from nine Pacific islands and Timor-Leste when there are not enough local workers available. Through the PALM scheme, eligible businesses can recruit workers for seasonal jobs for up to nine months or for longer-term roles for between one and four years in unskilled, low-skilled and semi-skilled positions. This helps to fill labour gaps in rural and regional Australia and allows workers to develop skills and send income to support their families and communities.

Tongan families have participated in formalised regional labour mobility programs since joining the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in 2007. Over the past two years the number of PALM scheme workers from Tonga has stabilised. Numbers for RSE have also remained relatively stable due to policy settings and caps. Migration, however, is not new to Tongan people, with Tonga having one of the largest Pasifika diaspora in Australia and New Zealand.

Since 2022 there have been growing public concerns about the social impacts of specific types of labour mobility — namely the PALM and RSE schemes. Tonga's experience is

consistent with a small but growing area of research that identifies the varied and emergent social impacts of transnational labour mobility on families and communities in the Pacific region.² Within the Tongan context, however, there is limited evidence on the dimensions, extent and drivers of specific social issues, including if and how labour mobility causes or exacerbates them.

In January 2024 the governments of Tonga and Australia identified the need for country-specific and time-sensitive research to inform policy and planning. In February 2024 the Tonga National Labour Mobility Steering Committee approved the Terms of Reference for the research study to be conducted jointly by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF). Through the Steering Committee, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs also requested coverage of RSE in the study.

The main objective of the study is to identify and understand the social impacts (positive and negative) of labour mobility on families and communities in Tonga. A further objective is to identify program improvements and potential policy reforms to enhance the benefits and minimise the potential risks of labour mobility.

Tongan families have participated in formalised regional labour mobility programs since joining the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in 2007.

² See the following section for a summary of existing research.



Mobility context

Tongan migration

Tonga has a long history of migration and transnationalism. The pre-colonial period of the Pacific area can be described as a “sea of islands” where people moved freely and frequently along ancient sea-faring routes.³ From the 1930s the population of Tonga’s main island increased substantially due to internal migration.⁴ International migration peaked from the 1960s onwards with Australia, New Zealand and the United States becoming popular destinations for Tongan migrants.⁵ In 2024 large diasporic populations continue to maintain strong links to their homeland.

Migration is a large part of Tongan culture, often considered a family decision and strategy, undertaken for the family, with the support of the family. The ongoing connections between migrants with their homelands mean that many people live in transnational households and transnational villages, rather than divergent communities.⁶

Va

Kinship is deeply ingrained in the Tongan identity. Tongan society exists as a hierarchy of royalty, nobility and commoners, and smaller systems within family units and communities. A person’s place in each social system defines their obligations to community and to country.

Kinship, whether to king, country, community or family, is nurtured through *tauhi va*, the practice of consciously “taking care of socio-spatial ties”.⁷ Tongan core values include generosity, respect, humility and reciprocity (or *tauhi va*, meaning to take care of, in the form of reciprocity).⁸ These values characterise how Tongans, including those living overseas, maintain strong ties across time and space. Even second-generation migrants who may have never been to Tonga are connected

through these kinship networks and are obliged to engage in *tauhi va*. *Tauhi va* is possible because the Tongan idea of space, or *va*, is conceptualised as “relating” rather than “separating” members of Tongan families and communities.⁹

Space and distance have social functions beyond separation.¹⁰ Migration and movement in Tonga have always been a core social function. Faster and longer travel across international boundaries — and across islands and villages — has prompted a shift in the relationship that Tongan people have with the concept of place and space.

Internal and transnational migration has also affected how people practice *tauhi va*. Tongan diaspora communities living in the United States, Australia and New Zealand remain connected to their homeland and to each other through “the constant back-and forth movement of people, goods, money, ideas, and symbols.”¹¹ Through *tauhi va*, the physical space between transnational Tongans is reconfigured so that communities expand to exist beyond the physical separation.¹²

Social change and a new wave of migration

Shifting patterns of outward migration have been paralleled by significant changes in Tongan society. Culture and society are never static, with observers and analysts pointing to several key social changes in Tonga over the past two decades. Notably, Tonga is experiencing a period of considerable flux, with tension around modernisation and traditional values. Combined with concerns around youth engagement and the digital age, there is a dynamic interplay between traditional culture and the influence of modernity.¹³

Social media usage has expanded considerably in the past decade and is now

used by 64.3% of the population.¹⁴ Facebook is a commonly used platform with Bigo and PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) also popular. Social media and the internet have enabled diaspora to maintain socio-spatial ties in Tonga, and care for relationships.¹⁵ Social media has, however, increasingly been used to engage in what Nishitani¹⁶ describes as 'social drama'. Recent initiatives from the Pacific, including Tonga, have also identified the sharp increase in technology-assisted and gender-based harassment.¹⁷

The current wave of Tongan outward migration — from early 2000s onwards — is markedly different from previous periods primarily due to the way that migration is managed. Since the end of 2022, the volume of Tongan migration has remained relatively stable within formalised temporary work programs in Australia and New Zealand, namely the PALM and RSE schemes. Within these programs, migration can be circular with family members living and working overseas for nine months. People then return to Tonga for several months, before returning to work in Australia or New Zealand.

The RSE and PALM scheme visas do not give family members the right to live and work in Australia or New Zealand. At the time of publication, the Australian Government had commenced a family accompaniment pilot for the PALM scheme. In 2024 Tonga confirmed participation in the pilot. Outside of the PALM scheme policy, family members

may also travel on a visitor or other visa for short periods, but the cost of health insurance and other financial costs associated with these visas are often prohibitive for many families.

There are considerable policy and program parameters across the PALM and RSE schemes, which may be more restrictive than other work visa types. These policy guidelines apply to all stages of the labour mobility journey and are applied by a range of different stakeholders. For example, participants need a reference letter from a town officer and church minister as part of MIA requirements for the application process. MIA also requires that applicants have written approval from their spouse to be able to participate in either scheme. MIA may also restrict mobility for various reasons (i.e. blacklisting). The Australian Government stipulates visa restrictions on family accompaniment (outside of the family accompaniment pilot) and some approved employers apply conditions on the consumption of alcohol or set travel restrictions.¹⁸

In sum, Tongan participation in PALM and RSE schemes has occurred amidst a long history of outward Tongan migration, and against a backdrop of changing social norms in Tonga. Opinions regarding the social impacts of both schemes have become more pronounced in the last two years, prompting questions about the nature of these impacts and their causes.

³ Lee, 2009.

⁴ <https://tongastats.gov.to/download/272/census-report-and-factsheet/7759/census-factsheet-2021-final.pdf>

⁵ Lee, 2009.

⁶ Lee, 2009.

⁷ Ka'ili, 2005.

⁸ Havea et al, 2021.

⁹ Niumeitolu, 2019.

¹⁰ Niumeitolu, 2019.

¹¹ Besnier, 2011.

¹² Ka'ili, 2005. p.87.

¹³ Besnier, 2011.

¹⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/social-mediaharm/103848444>

¹⁵ Nishitani, 2020.

¹⁶ Nishitani, 2014.

¹⁷ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/cyber-affairs/Pages/supporting-online-safety-in-the-pacific>

¹⁸ Some employers do not permit PALM scheme employees to leave their town of residence in Australia, even when on personal/holiday leave from work.

A triple win?

Current studies on regional labour mobility from the Pacific, including Tonga, to Australia and New Zealand, including from Tonga, point to a range of positive and negative social impacts resulting from work overseas. Economic gains from labour mobility remittances have enabled improvements in education, livelihoods and poverty reduction.¹⁹ The often cited ‘triple win’ of labour mobility suggests that individuals, labour sending and receiving countries each benefit from the economic and development gains of labour mobility.²⁰

Researchers also identify a range of social impacts including family breakdown, child neglect and increased alcohol consumption (Table 1). The existing research highlights a balance of opportunities and challenges.²¹ Less is known, however, about why these impacts are occurring, the extent to which labour mobility is a contributing factor, and whether impacts occur relatively evenly across all countries.

Existing research suggests that the social impacts of labour migration are different for Tonga compared to other Pacific island countries. The 2023 World Bank report on women’s participation in labour mobility identified that women’s confidence, agency and self-esteem had increased as a result of

participation in labour mobility.²² Yet only 50% of women and men from Tonga reported feeling in greater control of decisions and actions since participating in labour mobility compared to 90% in Vanuatu and almost 100% in Kiribati.

An earlier 2018 World Bank study comparing the social impacts of the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) in Tonga and Vanuatu found that gender norms were less likely to shift in Tonga as a result of labour mobility.²³ The same report also identified that negative impacts of SWP participation on intimate partner relationships were more pronounced in Tonga (41%) compared to Vanuatu (19%). There are therefore considerable differences between Tonga and other countries in respect to the social dynamics of regional temporary labour mobility and prevailing gender norms.

The RSE impact evaluation provides an extensive assessment of the causal relationship between labour mobility and social impacts.²⁴ In addition to identifying similar impacts outlined in other studies — including increased income and community support, relationship challenges and less adherence to traditional values — the study also identifies women as less likely than men to seek support for complex issues experienced during labour mobility.

¹⁹ Bedford, Bedford and Nunns, 2020; World Bank, 2023.

²⁰ Underhill-Sem and Marsters, 2017.

²¹ Bailey, 2019; World Bank, 2023.

²² World Bank, 2023.

²³ World Bank, 2018.

²⁴ Bedford, Bedford and Nunns, 2019.



Table 1. Research on impacts of PALM and RSE Scheme participation

Impact	Key studies	Countries	Main findings
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bailey, 2023 - Bedford et al, 2019 - Pacific Labour Facility, 2023 - Perkiss et al, 2022 - World Bank, 2023 - World Bank, 2018 	Most PALM and RSE scheme countries, including Tonga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased household income through remittances - Improved access to education due to increased income - Limited skills development/transfer - Overreliance on labour mobility - Remittances lead to inequality - Domestic labour market impacts
Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bedford et al, 2019 - Cunningham, J. 2024 - UNICEF, 2024 - Withers, 2022 	Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children of labour mobility parents have less educational aspirations - Children of labour mobility parents experience neglect - Improved access to education
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kanan and Putt, 2023 - Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, 2023 - Ofe-Grant et al, 2024 - World Bank, 2018 - World Bank, 2023 	Kiribati, Vanuatu, Tonga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women's participation limited due to social norms - Gender-based violence and harassment may occur before and during labour mobility - Women play more prominent role in village life in absence of men, but are not recognised for this
Care burden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Withers and Petrou, 2023 - Hill et al, 2018 - Fiji Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, 2023 	PALM general, Fiji	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Labour mobility leads to care gaps that can not be filled in the Pacific - Women impacted by triple burden due to labour mobility

Impact	Key studies	Countries	Main findings
Family breakdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hill et al 2018 - Barry et al, 2023 - Bedford et al, 2019 - Withers, 2022 - Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, 2023 	Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Tonga , Kiribati	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Labour mobility may cause family breakdown, particularly due to extra-marital affairs
Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nishitani, 2014 - Petrou and Stead, 2023 	Tonga , Vanuatu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social media an important tool for maintaining communication - Social media used for conflict and online harassment
Workplace issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stead, 2022 - Perou and Connell, 2018 - Barry et al, 2023 - Ofe-Grant et al, 2024 	PALM general, Vanuatu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Racial abuse - Gendered workplace violence - Sexual harassment - Accommodation issues - Worker exploitation

To date, qualitative studies on the social impacts of labour mobility have largely been multi-country, single scheme (PALM or RSE) and drawn from a relatively small number of interviews with returned workers or program stakeholders.²⁵ In addition, most studies focusing on Tonga, and indeed most the Pacific, are based on fieldwork conducted before 2022 and there is therefore a need for updated analysis across the PALM and RSE schemes.

A further gap in the existing evidence is an understanding of why these issues are

occurring and to what extent they are caused by labour mobility. For example, the 2019 RSE impact evaluation²⁶ identifies why various impacts might be happening, and the extent to which the RSE scheme is contributing.²⁷ Similar studies of social impacts for the PALM scheme have not to date been conducted. Finally, most studies consider labour migration to occur in a vacuum, considering only what happens during labour mobility and thus overlooking the spatial and temporal dimensions of social change (i.e. *ta* and *va*).

²⁵ The 2019 RSE impact evaluation and World Bank 2023 study are notable exceptions.

²⁶ Bedford, Bedford and Nunn, 2019.

²⁷ Bedford, Bedford and Nunn, 2019.

Tonga's participation in PALM and RSE schemes

Tonga joined the RSE scheme in April 2007, followed by the PALM short-term scheme in 2012 and PALM long-term scheme²⁸ in 2018. By July 2024, the number of Tongan participants in Australia on the PALM scheme was 3,850²⁹, with a further 850 in New Zealand on the RSE Scheme. The total number of individuals who have participated in the schemes since inception is much higher with more than 7,000 in RSE³⁰ and 7,500³¹ in the PALM scheme.

The number of PALM scheme workers in Australia at any given time has decreased since 2022. RSE scheme participation has remained stable due to the cap on worker numbers set by the New Zealand Government.³² Across the three schemes (PALM short-term, PALM long-term and RSE) most Tongan workers are mobilised under the short-term PALM scheme.

Temporary labour mobility is an important contributor to the Tongan economy. In 2022, total personal remittances to Tonga were estimated to be AUD\$337 million, or equal to 45% of Tongan gross domestic product.³³ Approximately 6 to 8% of these remittance flows are from PALM and RSE scheme workers.³⁴

Gender

The PALM and RSE schemes together employ far more men than women. Women's participation varies considerably by scheme. Only 12% of Tongan RSE workers are women, compared to 21% in the Tonga PALM short-term scheme and 34% in the Tonga PALM long-term scheme. Women's participation rates for Tonga in PALM long-term are considerably higher than the average participation rate of 20% across the entire PALM scheme.

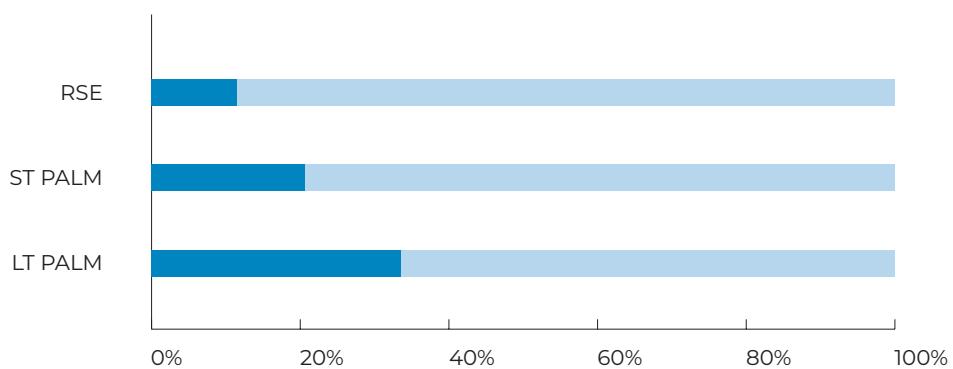


Figure 1. Gender participation rates for PALM and RSE schemes

Source: In-country recruitment database

²⁸ Formerly the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS)

²⁹ Current workers in Australia at July 2024, including 2605 long-term and 1245 short-term workers. PALMIS data, Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

³⁰ Bedford and Bedford, 2023.

³¹ Tonga IRD data, Ministry of Internal Affairs Tonga.

³² There are currently no caps on worker numbers under the PALM Scheme – the RSE scheme has a cap of 19,500 participants across all participating Pacific island countries.

³³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR>.
[CD.DT?locations=TO](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/CD.DT?locations=TO)
[and https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=TO](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=TO)

³⁴ National Reserve Bank of Tonga.



Age

The average age of PALM and RSE scheme workers is decreasing. More than half (56%) of workers across both schemes are under 30 years of age. In particular, a rapid increase

in young Tongan workers in the RSE scheme is changing the age composition of Tongan labour mobility.

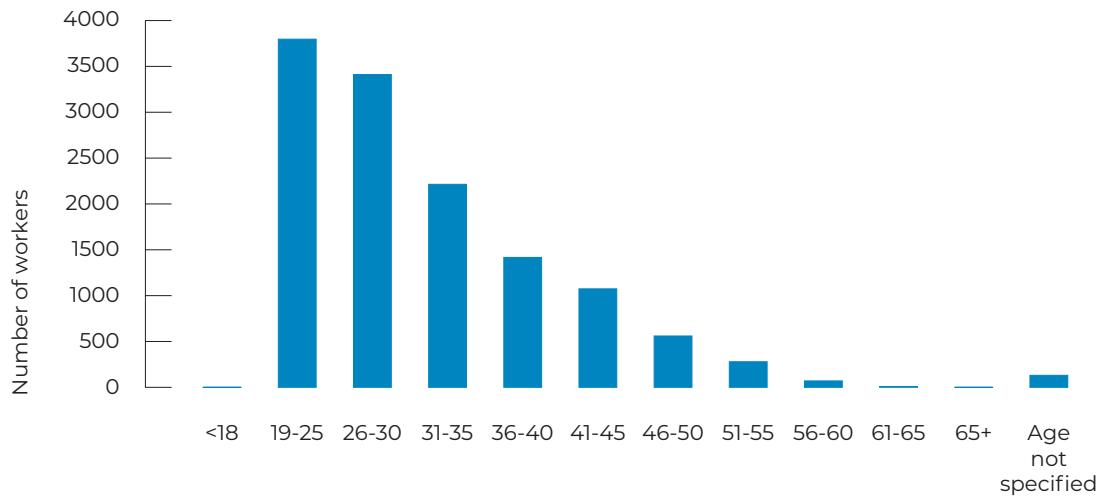


Figure 2. Number of workers across all Tongan labour mobility (by age)

Source: In-country recruitment database

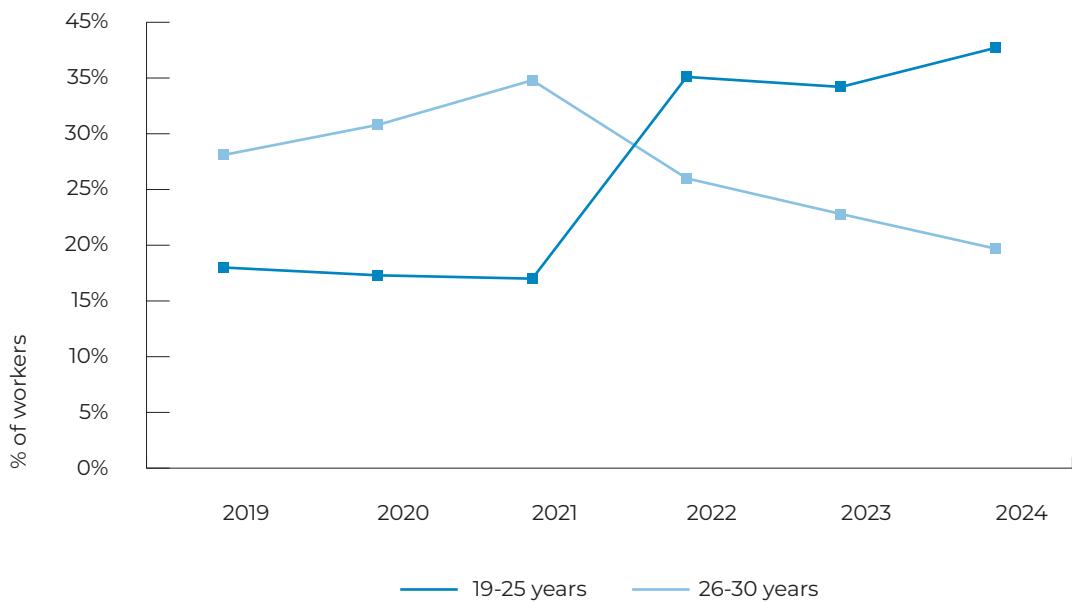


Figure 3. Changes in the age composition of Tongan labour mobility (all schemes)

Source: In-country recruitment database

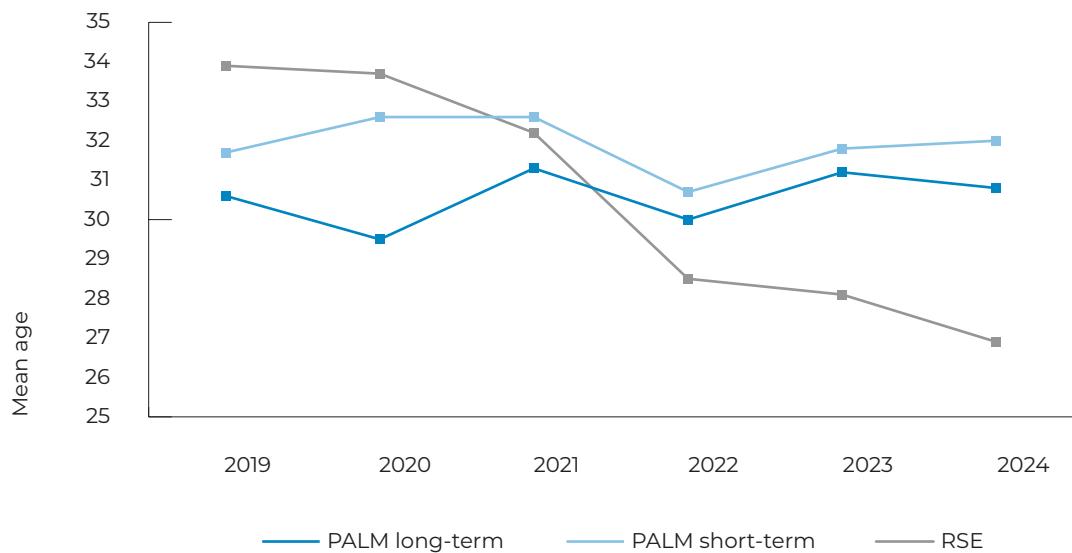


Figure 4. Mean age of Tongan labour mobility workers by scheme

Source: In-country recruitment database

In 2021, participants aged 19-25 years accounted for 16% of RSE mobilisations. The proportion of workers in this age bracket increased considerably from 2022, with younger workers making up about 50% of the total RSE worker cohort in 2024. Numbers across all other age brackets have decreased, including for workers aged 26-30, which was previously the largest bracket.

The average age of PALM and RSE scheme workers is decreasing. More than half (56%) of workers across both schemes are under 30 years of age.



Policy context

PALM scheme and RSE policies are set and managed by the Government of Tonga (MIA), Australian Government (DFAT and DEWR) and New Zealand Government (MBIE), as set out below.

Tonga

The PALM and RSE schemes are managed in Tonga by the Tonga Labour Mobility Policy and the Tonga Labour Mobility Operations Manual (Operations Manual). The Operations Manual outlines recruitment types and processes, pre-departure activities, worker welfare and wellbeing requirements, returned worker support, superannuation and reintegration.

PALM and RSE scheme participants from Tonga are required to comply with the Government of Tonga's Labour Mobility Code of Conduct. It requires workers to engage in appropriate behaviour while in Australia – at work and outside of it – as ambassadors of Tonga. 'Blacklisting' involves the individual and their family members being temporarily or permanently suspended from the schemes. Workers can be blacklisted for reasons including disengagement, extra marital affairs, drinking alcohol, negative behaviour and misconduct. Immediate family members are also blacklisted when a worker is blacklisted.

Employers, family members, immigration departments and country liaison officers can report or recommend blacklisting. Reports

are submitted to the MIA-OED office to assess whether the participant should be allowed to return on one of the schemes, suspended for a short period, or permanently excluded.

MIA-OED has a Welfare Unit with a small team of two staff who respond to reported cases and requests for support from family members, workers, approved employers and country liaison officers.

Australia

In Australia, the policy framework focuses on both employers and workers. The Deed and Guidelines³⁵ stipulate the obligations of approved employers regarding recruitment applications, accommodation, worker welfare (including outside of work), work injuries, cultural competency and administrative and operational matters. The PALM scheme Deed and Guidelines and grievance management policy³⁶ are the key policies for supporting workers in Australia. Support also includes the Community Connections program³⁷ and country liaison offers.³⁸ At the time of research there were two part-time country liaison officers for Australia, supporting just under 4,000 Tongan workers located across the country. Both country liaison officers for Tonga are male, and church pastors.

In 2023 amendments were made to the Deed and Guidelines for improved worker safeguards, including minimum 30 working hours per week (averaged over four weeks).³⁹

³⁵ <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/resources/palm-scheme-approved-employer-deed-agreement>

³⁶ <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/resources/grievance-management>

³⁷ Managed and funded by DEWR. <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/worker-support>.

³⁸ Managed and funded by DFAT.

³⁹ <https://www.dewr.gov.au/download/15453/factsheet-final-palm-deed-and-guidelines-settings-5-june-2023/33479/factsheet-final-palm-deed-and-guidelines-settings-5-june-2023/pdf>

⁴⁰ <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/dmsdocument/27706-outcomes-of-the-recognised-seasonal-employer-policy-review-proactiverelease-pdf>

⁴¹ <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/employ-migrants/hiring-a-migrant/employ-workers-through-the-rse-scheme/rse-changes-for-the-2024-25-season>

New Zealand

In New Zealand, the MBIE is responsible for RSE scheme policy. An employer can only seek permission to recruit workers from the Pacific after they have applied for and received RSE status, and labour market testing has been undertaken as part of the 'Agreement to Recruit' (ATR). Employers are required to outline as part of the RSE status application and ATR, how pastoral care and safety will be addressed

A recent review of the scheme identified that the compliance system has not kept pace with the increase in workers, with few employers losing their RSE status or being declined an ATR despite evidence of non-compliance.⁴⁰

In September 2024, several policy changes were made to the RSE scheme including the requirement for a minimum 30 hours per week averaged over four weeks, the requirement to pay RSE workers above minimum wage, worker eligibility for multiple entry visas and the ability for workers to undertake funded training even if it is not within the scope of their current RSE role.⁴¹

At the time of this research there were three full time Pacific liaison officers supporting just under 1,000 workers. All Tongan Pacific liaison officers in New Zealand are male.

Approved Employers

Approved employers in Australia and New Zealand are responsible for ensuring the wellbeing of workers and compliance with Australian and New Zealand workplace, occupational health and safety and other laws. Employers are also responsible for delivering on-arrival briefings and reporting to DEWR, the Australian Department of Home Affairs and the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade on immigration and visa status (i.e. when workers return home or disengage from the scheme).



Table 2. PALM and RSE scheme policy context

	Policy areas	Key policy documents	Policy in practice
Government of Tonga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recruitment - Mobilisation - Code of Conduct - Family and Worker Welfare in Tonga and Australia - Reintegration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operations Manual - Labour Mobility Code of Conduct - Team Leader Code of Conduct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managing different recruitment pathways - Pre-departure briefings and support - OED Welfare Unit support for families - Worker and family blacklisting - Reintegration support
Governments of Australia and New Zealand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Worker welfare in Australia - Employer applications for PALM scheme participation - Approved employer obligation compliance 	<p>Australia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deed and Guidelines - Grievance Policy <p>New Zealand</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employer status/registration (biannual) - Agreement to Recruit - Worker agreements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Different mechanisms for worker support including CLOs, phone line, Community Connections (Australia) and grievance policy management (Australia) - Assurance and compliance functions - Employer relationship management
Approved Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workplace rights and obligations - Worker PALM visa and immigration requirements - Worker welfare in Australia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deed and Guidelines - Employer operational policies - Federal, state and territory legislation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recruitment - Ensuring workers understand employment contracts - International and domestic travel - On arrival briefings - Worker occupational health and safety - Worker support after hours - Health and medical support

Methodology

Aim and approach

The aim of this qualitative study is to identify and understand the social impacts (positive and negative) of labour mobility for families and communities in Tonga.

The key research questions include:

1. What are the most common social impacts experienced by PALM and RSE scheme participant families and communities?
2. What are the drivers of these social impacts, as experienced by PALM and RSE scheme participant families and communities?
3. To what extent is labour mobility directly contributing to or exacerbating social impacts?

The research team included three researchers from Tonga and two PLF researchers from Australia (five researchers in total). Researchers from Tonga included two consultants – with extensive research experience on regional temporary labour mobility – and a newly appointed MIA staff member with responsibility for worker welfare.

The research methodology was developed collaboratively by the research team and MIA-OED senior leadership and welfare unit staff. In February 2024 the PLF and MIA-OED team met with a small number of church leaders, NGO representatives and town and district officials to understand their experiences with and views on labour mobility, including their views on the type and extent of social issues they observe among labour mobility families. These meetings informed the focus of *talanoa* guiding themes.

In May 2024 a two-day research workshop was held in Nuku'alofa with the research team and MIA-OED staff to review and further develop the methodology, including the *talanoa* guides. MIA-OED welfare staff and senior leadership also attended the workshop which provided important operational insights, including discussion of key challenges in responding to social issues.

Approach

The study is qualitative and adopts a Pasifika and Tongan cultural framework for deep exploration of lived experience and its complexities.⁴² The research team's approach to data collection and analysis was to explore how culture, spirituality, transnationalism and gender shapes different experiences and outcomes for people, their families and communities. The study has clear policy objectives, seeking input from research participants on strategies to maximise the benefits and minimise the risk of labour mobility.

In August and October 2024 sense-making sessions were held with the National Tonga Labour Mobility Steering Committee, Tongan government ministries, church leaders and NGOs. Preliminary findings were presented and discussed, guiding further analysis of data for inclusion in the final study report.

Data were analysed⁴³ for dominant themes as shared by research participants. Each *talanoa* was semi-structured, enabling participants to focus on experiences that most affected them while also ensuring key topics were discussed.

⁴² Fonua, 2021.

⁴³ Thematically and using NVivo software.

Data sources

Individual and group discussion in Tonga and Australia were conducted through the *talanoa* method. *Talanoa* is a culturally appropriate method in Tonga to explore and understand the lived experiences of PALM and RSE scheme participants and their families.⁴⁴ During the initial two weeks of data collection, each *talanoa* was co-facilitated by a Tongan and Australian researcher. This cross-cultural approach ensured shared understanding and refinement of the *talanoa* guide and key research questions. It also enabled early, iterative and co-analysis which continued throughout data collection, data analysis and report drafting. Individual *talanoa* were held with workers (returned and in Australia) and family members. Stakeholder *talanoa* involved five to six participants per *talanoa*.

Discussions were transcribed verbatim during each *talanoa*. Transcripts were cross-referenced with audio (where available) or with co-facilitators' notes. Tongan researchers took verbatim notes in Tongan, which were then translated to English. *Talanoa* were 1 to 1.5 hours on average.

Tongan Government program data on worker mobilisations and worker welfare was also analysed. MIA program data from the In-country Recruitment Database (IRD)⁴⁵ was analysed to identify PALM and RSE participation trends including demographic variables. Worker welfare data maintained by the OED welfare team on PALM and RSE scheme workers was also cleaned and analysed.

Sampling

The sample for this study included a total of 302 participants across all stakeholder groups:

- 145 PALM and RSE worker family members and returned workers resident in Tonga. Field sites for data collection included all major islands in Tonga including Tongatapu, Vava'u, Eua and Ha'apai. Given the distance of the Niuatoputapu and Niuafo'ou outer islands from Tongatapu and the limited travel options, the research team interviewed PALM and RSE scheme participants and family members originally from these islands based in Tongatapu, including Niue.
- 82 workers in Australia from the horticulture and meat processing industries in regional and metropolitan towns in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia.
- 75 stakeholders from Tonga including district and town officers, church leaders, NGO representatives and staff of Tongan Government ministries.
- A further 49 qualitative semi-structured interviews with returned Tongan PALM scheme workers in Tongatapu in February 2024, and Tongan workers in Australia in 2023, were also analysed to triangulate the findings.⁴⁶ These interviews were conducted for the PALM Scheme Tracer Study and also explored the social impacts of PALM scheme participation.

⁴⁴ Fonua, 2021; Fa'avae 2016; Tecun et al, 2018.

⁴⁵ Tonga was one of the first PALM Scheme countries to implement the IRD.

⁴⁶ This data was used to triangulate key themes and findings and is not including numbers listed throughout the report.

⁴⁷ Cunningham, 2024; UNICEF, 2024.

Box 1. Definitions

Limitations

The large qualitative sample, and the cross-cultural team approach, greatly enhance the reliability of the study's findings. It should be noted, however, that the study is not representative of the experiences of all Tongan PALM and RSE scheme workers and their families.

A further limitation is that the sample of PALM scheme workers includes family members in Tonga, returned workers in Tonga and workers in Australia. By comparison the RSE sample includes only returned RSE workers and family members of RSE-sending households. Tongan RSE workers in New Zealand were not interviewed.

The study considers social impacts at the household and community level. It does not include national or national level impacts on Tonga's economy or domestic labour market.

Finally, as the study did not collect data from children due to research ethics, it does not fully examine the impacts of labour mobility on children. Some adult participants discussed care arrangements for children, as outlined in the findings section. Moreover, assessment of the impacts of labour mobility on children – with specific research questions about these impacts – has been the subject of other studies including in Tonga.⁴⁷

Migration

Migration is a social process, and a function of aspirations and capabilities. In the Pacific context these functions and capabilities are not only individual, but family, faith and community based. Migration has both instrumental (earning income to survive) and intrinsic (a desire to see the world, or personal pride from fulfilling family and cultural obligations) dimensions. At its core, migration is the freedom to choose. This includes the freedom to choose whether to move or to stay, and the freedom of life choices throughout the labour mobility journey.

Life event

A life event is defined as a situation or experience that occurs in everyday life, be it in Tonga, Australia or New Zealand. Life continues across time (*ta*) and space (*vo*) for families and people engaged in labour mobility. Life events that occur during labour mobility are part of individual, family and community life journeys that were unfolding well before initial departure for labour mobility. Life events can be positive or negative. Those that are negative are risk factors for longer term and larger scale impacts. Those that are positive are enablers for positive impacts. Life events that happen during labour mobility are often confused with social impacts, but they are not the same thing. In sum, not everything that happens to someone while participating in labour mobility is a social impact.

Social impact

Social impacts are the cumulative effects of individual behaviour (and life events) on a household or community. A positive social impact describes any improvement in wellbeing or equality within a community. A negative social impact is any change that detrimentally impacts wellbeing or equality within a community. Social impacts have a range of different dimensions including health, social wellbeing, environmental, cultural and gender.



Understanding social impacts: a conceptual framework

Life events happen to everyone. Life events are different from social impacts. Life events lead to social impacts – affecting the psychological and physical well-being of families and communities – when connection and support across the labour mobility journey are missing or inadequate.

The concepts of connection and support are deeply ingrained in Tongan culture. There are four 'pillars' of Tongan culture including *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *angafakatokilalo* (humility), *tauhi va* (cultivating healthy relationships/reciprocity), and *mamahi'i me'a* (loyalty/passion).⁴⁸ Cultural and spiritual connection includes embodying respect, loyalty, maintaining relationships and practicing humility.

A key theme in the data across all participants groups was that of personal choice and agency, and specifically the choice to engage in or refrain from certain behaviours and activities. Agency is defined as the

ability to make choices and act on them.⁴⁹ *Fakafo'ituitui* ('it's a personal decision') was shaped by the quality of connection in a person's life including respect, obligation and internal or intrinsic motivation at the spiritual, community and individual levels. The types of individual decisions that people made were also guided by access to different types of support in Australia and Tonga.

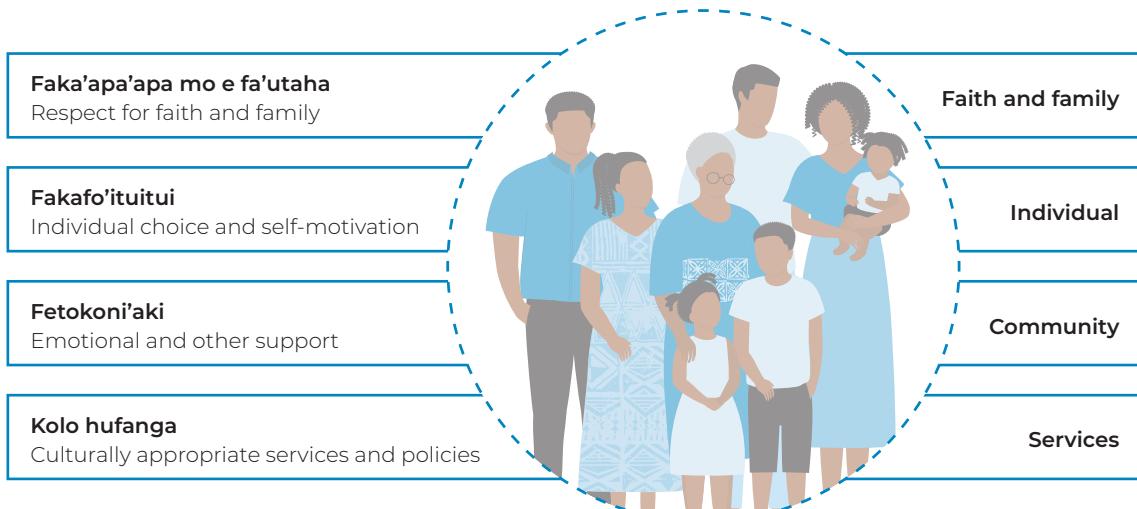
Individuals within the PALM and RSE schemes are positioned within this system of family, community, workplace and program or institutional support. This system has both enabling and guiding dimensions. When the structures of support and connection are missing or inadequate for labour mobility participants and their families, challenges are more likely to lead to negative social impacts. Similarly, when these supports are present, culturally responsive and gender-sensitive positive impacts are more likely to occur at the individual, household and community levels.

⁴⁸ Havea et al, 2021.

⁴⁹ Kabeer, 1999.



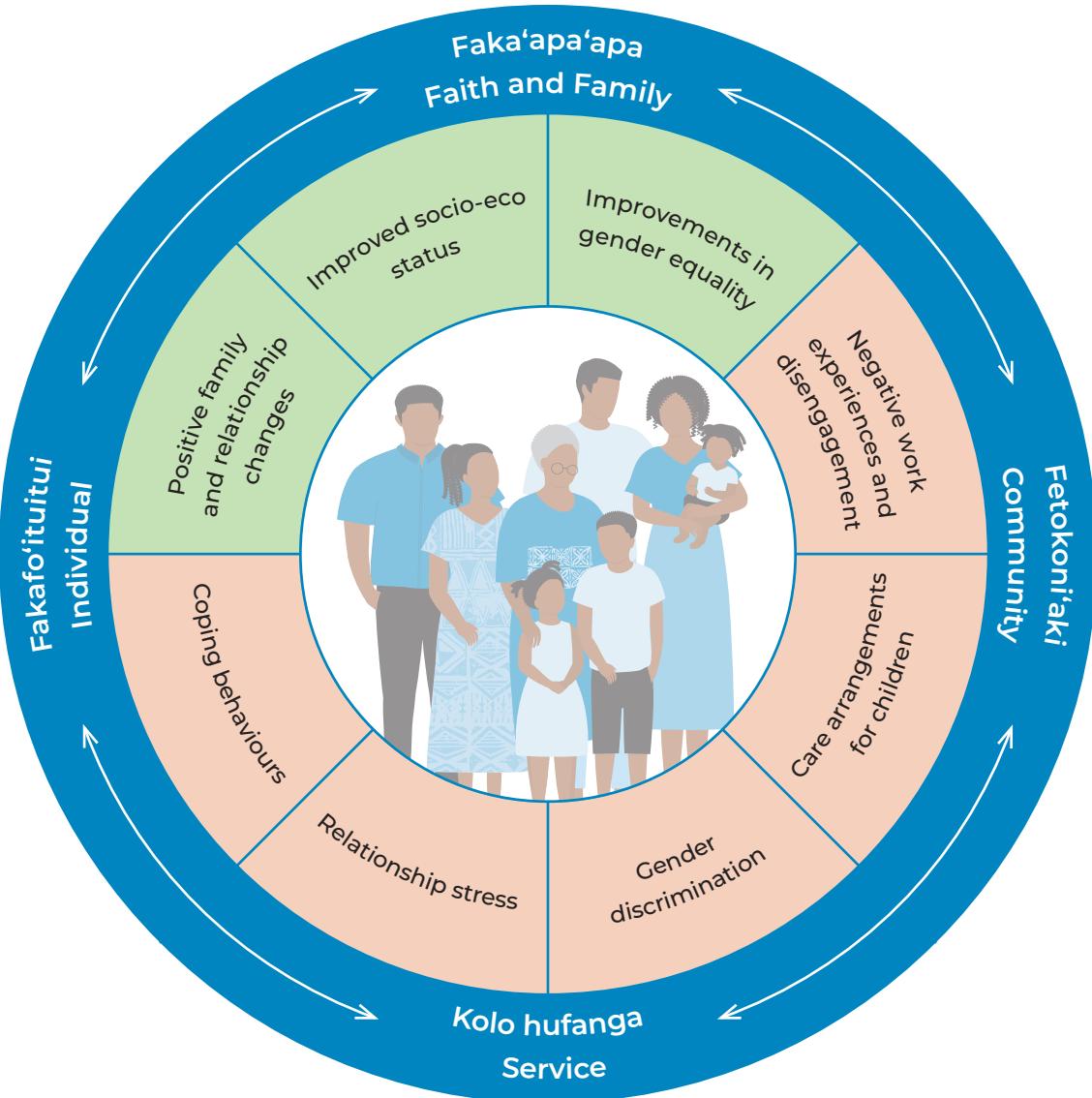
Figure 5. Conceptual framework



This cultural and conceptual framework identifies that the opportunities and challenges of labour mobility are enhanced or exacerbated by the existing model of care. 'Existing' in this case means what is available, what may reasonably be expected and what

is needed, but not necessarily available. The framework therefore emphasises that what happens during labour mobility is shaped by the supports and connections (to family, community and culture) available before, during and after labour mobility.

Figure 6. Summary of findings



What are the main opportunities of PALM and RSE scheme participation?

The study identifies three main opportunities associated with PALM and RSE scheme participation including 1) improved economic status 2) positive changes in family and 3) interpersonal relationship and improvements in gender equality. The opportunities arising from labour mobility and flow-on social impacts identified are complex with both positive and negative dimensions. This section identifies the main opportunities associated with PALM and RSE scheme participation and explains the complexity within, and interconnection between, different impacts.

1. Improved socio-economic status

Tongan families are global families with at least one, and often many, relatives living in New Zealand and Australia. Relatives may also be PALM and RSE scheme participants or permanent residents through different visa pathways. In addition, multiple family members engage in labour mobility. Intergenerational participation in labour mobility was prominent in the data with fathers and sons, or occasionally daughters, working on the PALM or RSE scheme for the same employer at the same time.

Almost 70% of worker and family participants described the socio-economic gains of participation in labour mobility. Money earned from labour mobility was spent on education for children and siblings, university fees for workers themselves, new or renovated houses and land, vehicles, family obligations, church contributions and loans.⁵⁰

Supporting the education of children, nieces, nephews, and siblings was an important

priority for many participants. Of the 47 participants who talked about family members going to school, 17 explicitly mentioned they were paying for primary and secondary school fees⁵¹ and 14 referred to post-secondary or university studies. Parents paid for their children's education, women and men paid for their younger sibling's education and a few participants (both women and men) had decided to participate in labour mobility to fund their own university fees.

Sorry, I'm getting a little bit emotional, it's just.... I have three kids, and their education is paid. I used to have a day job here at the [organisation] as a [position]. But it was only 20,000 a year I couldn't afford education, so instead of staying here I took the seasonal program.

(Male, PALM short-term, horticulture)

Significant increases in annual and ongoing church contributions were identified by 25% of participants as a direct result of labour mobility, leading to improvements in social status but also improved feelings of self-worth and value.

⁵⁰ See also <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019-06/apo-nid242211.pdf>

⁵¹ Government primary schools and several faith-based primary schools in Tonga are free. There are few private primary schools that have school fees.

Some church leaders shared that although church congregation numbers had decreased, contributions to the church had increased significantly.

Last year was really good. I returned home with good money. When I went home it was time for the church offering and I contributed a lot.

(Male, short-term PALM, horticulture)

One negative aspect of this change is that a small number of participants (<20) commented on the need to undertake further periods of work in Australia or New Zealand to be able to meet these increased church contribution costs. Others felt that increased income from labour mobility led to competition between church members.

I have also seen a lot of changes where those who now have the money from the program go through a process of showing off. Parents compete for who donates the most to fund raising and church functions.

(Male stakeholder and family member of PALM short-term participant)

These views on competition over the value of church contributions tended to be from participants with a higher social status, and the perception of negative views within Tongan communities about 'toli' (fruit pickers) due to evident changes in social status.

A small number of participants explained that they had joined PALM or RSE schemes because they did not have land collateral for loans, commenting that their strong preference was to remain in Tonga. However, because of the lack of access to land (and loan collateral), they had little choice but to join a labour mobility scheme to establish a business and support their family.

Remittances fulfil more than economic goals. The ability to meet family and church obligations is also about making progress, exercising agency and freedoms and being

proud of your achievements.

I paid for my children's education and my brother's kids as well. My daughters have now joined me [on the PALM scheme] and see for themselves that it is not an easy job. They also see and enjoy the benefits of having the power to buy your own things.

(Woman, short-term PALM, horticulture)

These social and cognitive processes enhance social status within families and communities. The ability to honour and respect core Tongan values, through labour mobility participation, enhances not only how participants perceive their place in the world, but further drives the achievement of personal, family and community goals.

What leads to improved socio-economic status?

Work and economic opportunities in Tonga were described as limited by 40% of worker and family participants. Many people had jobs prior to departure, however the income earned from this work – including government jobs and salaries – was not enough to financially support families for basic food and housing needs. For others, the goal of owning a home, purchasing a vehicle and being able to contribute to church and family obligations was simply not possible with the income earned in Tonga.

Before Australia, we struggled to pay our bills and put food on the table. So we began thinking whether he should go overseas and start working to protect our family and renovate our house. There was no other option but to go on the seasonal work. Even getting a loan just didn't work. We'd get the loan, but it was always so hard to repay.

(Woman, spouse of long-term PALM worker in hospitality)

Half of worker participants started labour mobility with a clear goal that was discussed and agreed with spouses and family



members. Often goals changed over time. With each successive mobilisation land was purchased, houses were built and school fees were paid. All stakeholder groups identified a clear purpose and outcome as critical for participants to navigate the challenges and opportunities throughout labour mobility.

Because I am proof. My husband and children went on the program with no problem at all. If you go with your goal in mind there won't be any problem.

(Spouse, short- and long-term PALM, horticulture and meat processing)

Participants who shared these goals with their family members felt better equipped to handle the new environment overseas and workplace challenges. Half of worker and family participants referred to *manatu'i a e ngahi fofonga i 'api* (remember the faces back home) as an important form of connection to their family members during physical separation.

Everything about my life here, I share with my family. It's always on my mind. It's not something that I ever forget. Every day, I wake up and go to work, I see my family in my mind. I don't see anything that would stop me from looking back to my family back home.

(Male, long-term PALM, meat processing)

These participants acknowledged the risks that physical separation presented to their relationships. Workers and family members

explained that the challenges of separation were minimised by maintaining love and respect for their spouses, parents and children. They remained motivated to act in a manner that would make their family members proud.

Most participants made regular financial and social contributions to their immediate families, relatives, communities and churches. The act of successfully fulfilling cultural, spiritual and familial obligations was a powerful motivator to be resilient and focused in Australia and New Zealand.

Participants expressed that meeting their obligations in Tonga and engaging in certain activities in Australia (like going out, drinking alcohol or spending money on themselves) are mutually exclusive. Being connected and accountable to families and communities at home meant prioritising church, family and community obligations, while also avoiding behaviours overseas that might jeopardise their ability to meet these obligations.

2. Positive changes in family and intimate partner relationships

Participants described a wide range of changes that happened in their personal relationships during labour mobility. Changes in family and intimate partner relationships were diverse.

Sixty-two percent of participants identified maintaining or strengthening positive relationships with spouses and family during labour mobility.

New intimate relationships occurred for 11% of single worker participants ($n=18$) during labour mobility. These participants were single at the time of meeting their partner, who was either Tongan, Samoan, Filipino or Australian. Some went on to marry their new partner and had children during their labour mobility journey. This aspect of pregnancy on the PALM scheme is often overlooked.

Worker and family participants also described strengthened relationships between parents (remaining in Tonga) and adult children (participating in labour mobility) including greater independence, empathy and maturity among adult children. Women in particular gained respect from parents and siblings in their role as a primary income earner.

What leads to positive changes in family and intimate partner relationships?

In the case of improved family relationships, the experience of living overseas and working in Australia and New Zealand leads to increased maturity and responsibility for some younger participants. This is a common life event for many young people who travel away from parents for work.

As a result, parent's perceptions of their children change, as do adult children's perceptions of themselves. Adult children on labour mobility enable their parents and siblings to fulfil family, community and church obligations, which enhances respect, pride and connection.

I see the change in my sons going on the program becoming more giving to me and all my relatives.

(Mother, RSE household, horticulture)

I work well away from home and when I come home I find that my parents appreciate me more. Maybe it's because of the money I send and the confidence I now feel - but I have noticed those changes.

(Woman, short-term PALM, horticulture)

Maturity, resilience, patience and better communication were identified as the main reasons that married couples improved their relationships during labour mobility. Separated couples also identified the importance of frequent communication (at least daily) to maintain connection and resolve issues.

There's some difference. He seems more mature. He's better at handling money. And

our relationship seems to be better he seems to treasure and spend more time with us, even over the long distance. These have been good changes.

(Woman, spouse of RSE and short-term PALM participant, horticulture)

When I applied from Tonga my wife did not agree for me to join the program because I was still drinking alcohol and I used to have other women on the side. When I came to Australia, I promised my wife that I will prove to her that I am capable of changing and faithful by working hard and I even stopped drinking. With that I vowed to myself that I will never do anything to ruin my marriage. I have gained my wife's trust and it has been a very enjoyable journey when you trust each other.

(Male, long-term PALM, meat processing)

Almost half of worker and family participants described cohesive and mutually supportive work groups. These experiences tended to be with employers and at locations that:

- had smaller numbers of worker cohorts (both Tongan and from other Pacific island countries)
- employed workers that had previously worked together, or were from the same village/family
- had supportive team leaders who fostered positive group dynamics
- provided sufficient work hours (well above 30 hours per week and often 6 days of work)
- had church and community activities available through work groups and outside of work
- ensured suitable single gender and reasonably priced accommodation, that was not overcrowded.

Working in close-knit groups was a preference expressed by 43% of worker and family participants, particularly working with others from the same village. RSE workers felt the strongest sense of cohesion (55%) followed

by short-term PALM (40%) and long-term PALM (33%) scheme workers. This sense of cohesion extended into families at home, with a smaller number of spouses commenting that they maintained close relationships — meeting regularly and for special occasions — with others that had family members in the same group. Church was also an important connector and supporter of spouses who remained in Tonga.

These views speak directly to the importance of maintaining the balance and harmony of va in Tongan culture, through peaceful and harmonious relationships. Smaller groups, preferably of people who already knew each other, regular prayer within teams and team leaders that provided strong leadership and support contributed to group cohesion. Va was more difficult to maintain within groups when “middlemen” were involved in recruiting workers including local agents and labour hire companies.

Recommendations for consideration

- MIA should consider developing a dedicated standalone Tonga family support program for family members, as currently outlined in the Tonga Labour Mobility Policy. This program should include community outreach support at the village recruitment, pre-departure, in Australia/New Zealand and return stages. Such a program would offer support to families before, during and after labour mobility including initial adjustment, transnational parenting during labour mobility, financial planning, mental health and reconnecting. This should be extended to include primary caregivers who are not parents. The family support program should link with existing NGO and other supports including IOM reintegration initiatives.

- MIA, with funding assistance from donors, should strengthen decentralised application, mobilisation, and pre-departure services and support to ensure that families in outer islands can participate in these activities. MIA offices in outer islands would require additional support and funding to provide these services. Although a relatively comprehensive range of services are provided in Vava'u, only limited services are available in other islands. Despite the availability of services, participants prefer to travel to Tongatapu. Further analysis of why this is the case should be undertaken to develop appropriate strategies to enhance the uptake of existing services.
- Stakeholders should commission further research on the outcomes of different recruitment streams and processes for workers, their families and communities.

3. Improvements in gender equality

Deeply ingrained gender norms regarding women's and men's roles in society in Tonga were described by 34% of participants. These norms meant that women were expected to perform the bulk of child and elder care, while men undertook work outside the home. In addition, gender norms were the reason some women did not participate in labour mobility, even when they wanted to.

Despite these norms, many women do participate in labour mobility. Tongan women's participation in PALM scheme long-term employment is much higher (34%) than PALM scheme short-term (21%) and RSE (12%).⁵² Tongan women's participation in PALM scheme long-term is much higher than the overall rate of women's participation in the PALM scheme across all countries (21%).

⁵² IRD data, Ministry of Internal Affairs Tonga.

Women participating in long-term PALM tended to be younger and single, or divorced and separated. Some married women also participate in the PALM scheme, often alternating with their spouse, or joining their husband on labour mobility. Improved socio-economic status and positive cognitive outcomes were particularly evident for single women and separated or divorced women with children.

But now that I am here, I can say that it has been an amazing experience. Without the program I would not be able to leave my parent's side because my family has been trying for me to leave the house and go visit places. I needed not only to help my family but also need to stand on my own two feet because my husband is gone.

(Woman, widowed, PALM short-term, horticulture)

The positive impact has been evident in the women we serve being more self-independent, financially independent and work and travel with confidence. These are wonderful traits and transformation we are happy to note and report on.

(Non-government stakeholder)

For many women, participation in labour mobility has meant becoming the primary breadwinner. However, obligations to children, family and community do not lessen. Sometimes these obligations created strain, especially when participants were unable to meet them due to time, working conditions,

weather or injury. In a new environment, other participants began to question expectations of people at home, and their duty to meet them.

Since I returned, our relationship has been really strained. It was the money that changed our relationship. The expectation that I must always serve them, and give to them, because they are my husband's family.

(Woman, RSE, Horticulture)

Women's ability to escape abusive relationships either in Tonga or Australia because of their participation in labour mobility was also highlighted by a small number of participants.

My daughter was able to leave her abusive husband which is a big change. She found it really difficult to leave her husband here which is why they ended up going in the program. The biggest change for her was to leave him.

(Mother of three PALM participants)

If I hadn't gone to New Zealand, I would've stayed in that bad house, and the problem would've been the norm. It was all about the kids after that. It was all about the treatment of my kids. If I hadn't gone, the kids would've stayed with me, and the way my husband's sisters treated me would've been the norm. We would've still really struggled to move.

(Woman, RSE, Horticulture)

Why do improvements in gender equality occur?

At the individual level, improvements in gender equality tended to occur for women that had:

- an enabling support network (including parents in the case of young women who wanted to travel to Australia or New Zealand)
- left controlling or challenging relationships
- or had few options but to engage in labour mobility to support their children, and /or parents and siblings.



A small number of women described the opportunity that labour mobility provided to leave abusive situations, or to resolve them while in Australia with the protections available to women experiencing domestic violence. More broadly, labour mobility expands the ability to fulfil aspirations and enhance capabilities for many women, with flow on effects in confidence, self-worth and socio-economic status.

Implications

As other studies⁵³ have noted, improvements in gender equality as a result of labour mobility are limited by persistent gender norms. This study finds the same. For example, as discussed, there remains a strong expectation that men go out to work and women stay at home – even among labour mobility families. Interestingly, the number of women from Tonga participating in the PALM scheme has increased considerably, and particularly in the long-term stream, while women's participation has remained low and stable in RSE.

The increased number of women participating in the PALM scheme,

particularly the long-term stream, suggests that gender norms are shifting. One area of push back to these shifts is technology-assisted (online and social media) gender-based harassment and violence and discriminatory employment practices. To further enhance gender equality through labour mobility it is necessary to address these issues, as outlined in the following sections.

Recommendations for consideration

- Australian and New Zealand Governments should take additional measures – beyond current compliance and assurance activities – to ensure that employers are complying with Australian and New Zealand equal opportunity and employment legislation. MIA-OED staff should receive training on this legislation.
- OED and MIA's Women and Gender Equality Division should develop a targeted strategy in Tongatapu, Vava'u, Ha'apai and 'Eua to shift men's attitudes towards women's workforce participation. These initiatives should involve district and town officers.

⁵³ World Bank, 2018; World Bank 2023.

What are the main challenges of PALM and RSE scheme participation?

The main challenges of labour mobility reported by PALM and RSE scheme workers and their families include:

- engaging in coping behaviours (including alcohol and kava consumption, group conflict and payment for entertainment services)
- relationship stress
- care arrangements for children and
- negative work experiences leading to disengagement.

Although listed as challenges, there were also positive aspects to each. Challenges were not solely attributed to labour mobility – but had started or were deeply connected to life in Tonga before, and during, labour mobility.

1. Coping behaviours

Coping behaviours refer to strategies that individuals use to reduce and manage unpleasant emotions. Participants described three main coping behaviours they or others engaged in while in Australia.

- 25% of workers and family members described some form of **group conflict** (verbal or physical) between workers in their cohort. Group conflict occurred in both Australia and New Zealand and included tensions between newly arrived workers and existing cohorts, tensions in overcrowded accommodation due to lack of privacy and personal space, and gossip and discrimination within group cohorts.
- 67% of worker and family participants discussed **alcohol and kava consumption**. Of these participants 31% identified negative aspects of alcohol consumption

and to a lesser extent, kava consumption. This includes physical fights, verbal disagreements and work performance issues. A further 36% expressed either neutral or positive associations with alcohol and kava consumption including improved management or responsible alcohol consumption during labour mobility and the positive role of kava, and to a lesser extent alcohol, in managing stress and isolation. The service of kava by women was identified by a small number of participants (n=8) and linked to relationship issues.

- 5 workers described payment for **entertainment services**.⁵⁴

Team leaders with well-developed leadership skills⁵⁵ were mentioned by 20% of workers and family member study participants (30% in the case of RSE) as important for managing group conflict and challenging behaviours. Negative team leader behaviours towards workers were seen as contributing to a range of coping behaviours by 15% of PALM and RSE scheme workers and family members, and 18% of short-term PALM scheme participants.

Why do PALM and RSE workers engage in coping behaviours?

Engagement in these behaviours was described by participants as a way to deal with isolation and work stress. Group conflict and alcohol or kava consumption had equally negative and positive dimensions. In around half of all instances these behaviours enabled workers to manage normal levels of stress and isolation associated with work and life. Alternatively, excessive drinking or kava consumption was not able to be managed by either the individual or the team leader.

⁵⁴ Although the number of workers that mentioned others' paying for entertainment services was small, the number of workers that they identified as doing so was high. In one case up to 50 workers from a cohort in Australia. Several stakeholders in Tonga also identified that this was occurring and outlined the flow-on public health issues.

⁵⁵ Feedback on team leader dynamics was mixed, as outlined in following sections of this report.

Although Australia is more geographically dispersed compared to New Zealand, more RSE workers (19%) identified being isolated compared to PALM scheme workers (15%). Yet only 7% of RSE workers identified engaging in coping behaviours. Although most RSE participants described strict employer policies prohibiting alcohol consumption, almost one third of these respondents reported that workers still consumed alcohol, often leading to contract termination by the employer, or not being selected for further mobilisations by the team leader.

I think one thing is, since workers are really isolated, a lot of these kids... some of them are really new to dealing with isolation and that takes a mental toll on them.

(Male, RSE, horticulture)

The Government of Tonga policy is that workers are not permitted to consume alcohol in Australia and New Zealand. In Australia, employer policies around drinking were considered by workers to be extremely flexible, especially when compared to New Zealand. Some Australian employers implemented a no-alcohol policy, but in practice this was often not monitored. As one worker explained, “*There is a work policy of no drinking while at the farm, but no one monitors this until you do something drastically bad.*”

Accommodation arrangements during labour mobility also influenced workers’ engagement in coping behaviours. Many participants expressed that mixed gender accommodation was problematic as Tongan men and women believe they should not cohabit unless married. In the PALM scheme, issues with mixed gender accommodation were identified by 45% of short-term workers and family members in the study, compared to 21% of long-term workers. In the RSE scheme only 11% of scheme participants are women and most accommodation was single gender.

Around half of workers that lived in mixed

gender accommodation in large groups commented that this enhanced the likelihood of excessive alcohol consumption. The remaining half in mixed gender accommodation reported no issues. This suggests that other factors (occupational and work stress, group cohesion, team leader dynamics, employer support and isolation) are more likely to influence workers’ engagement in coping behaviours rather than mixed gender accommodation.

Almost 23% of long-term PALM scheme workers identified other issues with their accommodation, including overcrowding (leading to lack of privacy and group conflict), high costs and ongoing deductions for rent by labour hire companies when workers had moved into private rentals. Crowded accommodation was linked to increased conflict between workers due to the lack of privacy.

There was conflict between workers. We stayed in one room with eight people and we shared one kitchen, one bathroom. Us Tongans, we have so much stuff and there was no space for anyone to live normally. Having eight people in one room, it's a lot for us. Even if you share a room, you don't have any privacy. If you're on your phone, everyone in the room will hear it. It starts the fighting and all that. I think accommodation is one of the problems we faced when we were there and then we had to wake up at 4 o'clock just to make time for everyone to use the toilet or the bathroom. That's when arguments started.

(Woman, RSE, Horticulture)

Implications

PALM and RSE scheme participants engage in different behaviours to manage a range of feelings associated with labour mobility – stress, freedom, disconnection and being in a new environment. Restrictions on alcohol consumption are imposed by the Government of Tonga, employers and team leaders. In New Zealand, some employers

were reported to have a zero-tolerance policy on alcohol and less workers engaged in alcohol-related incidents. However, these policies do not stop people from engaging in coping behaviours. Tight restrictions do not support people to engage in a safe or moderated way, but rather have an opposing effect.

Team leaders should be reminded that they will be dealing with different people and trying to unite these differences will be difficult. Leaders should be flexible with their approaches in dealing with issues otherwise no one will listen, and they will become rebellious.

(Woman, RSE, Horticulture)

Coping behaviours become negative impacts when they result in relationship challenges (within a work group, or with spouses/partners), health issues (including substance abuse and mental health) and work performance issues.

Workers require better support to minimise the need to rely on coping behaviours in the absence of other supports. This includes 1) better preventative support and access to information from services in Tonga, Australia and New Zealand and 2) assistance from team leaders and employers that acknowledges that workers have the legal right engage in different behaviours in Australia and New Zealand. A culturally responsive support framework that encourages safe practices is essential.

Recommendations for consideration

- MIA and the Australian Government should develop a comprehensive system for team leader support including leadership and other training, de-briefing and counselling. This support would ensure that team leaders are adequately recognised and remunerated for their considerable extra responsibilities.
- The Australian Government should expand the current compliance and assurance activities for accommodation review and auditing. This would include undertaking regular on-site accommodation audits of a significant proportion of high to medium risk employer-provided accommodation. Concerns raised by workers – direct, or through a variety of channels – about accommodation quality, safety and excessive costs should continue to be investigated immediately. Employers should be breached where accommodation is not to the standard as required in the Deed and Guidelines.
- The Australian Government should engage local councils to also undertake inspections of accommodation to ensure that it complies with local government regulation.
- MIA and the Australian Government should work with NIB and service providers in Australia to ensure that mental health awareness and support activities are available.
- Stakeholders should commission further research on the underlying reasons for excessive alcohol consumption among PALM scheme workers.

2. Relationship stress

Relationship stress during labour mobility was described by 20% of worker and family participants. RSE participants were more likely to describe relationship stress (30%) compared to short-term PALM scheme

participants (19%) and long-term PALM scheme participants (10.4%). Mistrust between spouses was also higher for RSE scheme participants.

Reasons for relationship stress included (1) scheme participants not sending as much money to spouses as expected (2) jealousy and perceptions of affairs (3) pressure to loan relatives money. Mistrust between spouses was mainly related to concerns over affairs, largely fuelled by social media, including a Facebook page which targets horticulture seasonal workers in Australia and New Zealand.⁵⁶

Relationship stress also occurred before mobility. 15% (n=25) of all worker participants — both men and women — described their personal experience of separating from their spouses, or experiencing relationship stress, long before joining the PALM and RSE schemes. A smaller number of family members and stakeholders explained that relationship breakdown occurs in Tonga as well as among PALM and RSE scheme participants.

We get all kinds of complaints from families on their problems. Most of these complaints happen locally and very few are connected to the labour mobility program. There are more extra marital affairs happening in Tonga. Some are reported and some are not.

(Stakeholder)

Some people got married just to make their parents happy like an arranged marriage but when they go overseas they go do what makes them happy being with other people. Or even when they are here in Tonga, the guy is from this village and the girl is from the next village married or still single they still sneak around. It does not happen suddenly when they go on the program [PALM and RSE]

(Mother of short-term PALM participants in horticulture)

The number of reported extra-marital affairs in the MIA-OED welfare case data is also low relative to other types of reported incidents with 62 reported cases from 2016 to 2024. The number of extra-marital affairs reported is therefore low. It is also not increasing annually.⁵⁷ There is likely to be underreporting of relationship issues; however, the total number of actual cases reported in the study was also low at 7.5% (n=17) of the total worker and family sample. NGOs in Tonga also report cases of affairs and abandonment, which were also noted in the study data (as discussed in this report), however there is no available information on whether these are PALM and RSE households or otherwise.

The research team observed during data collection that co-worker perceptions of 'affairs' were not always an accurate assessment of actual relationships. For example, on several occasions workers perceived to be having affairs were in fact single people, formally separated or divorced from their former partners, that had met whilst in Australia and formed a new relationship.

Spouses that had good support systems in Tonga, including church, neighbours and family, were more likely to report positive changes in marital relationships. Strong and

⁵⁶ Fanguna.

⁵⁷ Noting that this may be due to a range of factors.

⁵⁸ See Table 1.

consistent communication also enabled participants to resolve relationship stress with spouses during labour mobility. Several spouses in Tonga reported strong family and support connections with other families of workers in the same group cohort.

Why does relationship stress happen?

Relationship stress does not occur primarily due to physical separation. As identified, relationships are nurtured across time and space for Tongans and thus being physically connected (or separated) is not foundational to the strength and endurance of interpersonal relationships.

Only a few workers and family members described the added difficulty of resolving conflicts virtually (i.e. not face to face). Rather, relationship stress occurs due to fears of extra-marital affairs linked to social media, navigating new environments and cultures in Australia and New Zealand, and workplace factors including highly variable work hours and pay rates in horticulture.

Social media has exacerbated relationship stress, with mental health implications for those affected. This includes actual cases, but more commonly the fear of relationship breakdown as a result of social media.

Most worker and family participants used Facebook, Bigo and PUBG to maintain contact with family. Almost 20% of study participants across all groups described the negative impacts of social media on relationships:

There have been a lot of changes and most notable is the effect and impact of social media. Some of our clients are so shaken by what they view on social media about their spouses on these programs.

(NGO Stakeholder)

Relationship stress does not equate to relationship breakdown. Three quarters of worker and family participants described working hard to successfully maintain trust and communication to either restore or

improve relationships. For most families, prayer is also an important bonding and spiritual activity to maintain connection and joint goals:

We prayed a lot and had a lot of phone calls. We video called every day and that helped a lot. The video calls are just like you're present. Nothing else, really just constant calling, and a lot of prayers. I did my best to call them and try and catch them while the kids are still awake. We knew it, and we worked with the time difference. It was all clear, and all good.

(Male, short-term PALM, horticulture)

Positive and negative outcomes of travelling as a couple on labour mobility were identified by 79 participants. The number of couples that are already travelling to Australia and New Zealand on the PALM and to a lesser extent RSE scheme is much higher than is currently understood by most scheme stakeholders. This is facilitated by individual employers, or by couples themselves who apply to MIA at the same time. Couples are not always recruited to the same employer, with some working in different states of Australia. Others work for the same employer and live together in Australia.

Sentiment regarding the value of couples travelling together was evenly split. On the one hand this was seen to enhance relationships and minimise the likelihood of extra marital affairs. On the other hand, around half of those that had travelled as a couple, or worked with couples from Tonga, identified that relationship breakdown still occurred when both spouses were in Australia. In sum, many people are already travelling with spouses and the outcomes of this family accompaniment are mixed.

Implications

The current focus – in the media and other studies⁵⁸ – on family breakdown and separation as a widespread impact caused by labour mobility is not supported by the study

data. Indeed, some spouses do separate, and many of those that had separated discussed existing challenges in their relationship prior to labour mobility.

Similarly, not all couples that experience relationship stress separate. Accessible and timely support sometimes made the difference between couples staying together or separating. Several workers and team leaders described how early intervention and informal counselling (i.e. having someone to talk to) assisted those with relationship stress to navigate relationship challenges and minimise longer term impacts:

The husband was here and the wife was in Tonga. The husband came and told me, he had a problem. I took him away from the workplace so he could tell me. His wife was having an affair in Tonga. I told him that maybe it would be best for him to go back to Tonga, so he went back home and got back together again with his wife. The husband shared with me that he still loved his wife, so I counselled him that he should go home and forgive the shortcomings that everyone goes through. So he went back home and everything is fine. The following year, he didn't come, and the year after that he came. We just gave him the time to spend with his wife, so they're still fine now.

(Male team leader, short-term PALM, horticulture)

For the spouses that do separate, the impacts — and particularly for women that remain in Tonga — can be significant including remittances withholding and financial stress. As outlined in the following sections, the number of the cases documented in this study is small. Workers and their spouses must have access to adequate support to minimise the impacts of such effects through services in Australia and New Zealand, and in

Tonga through MIA and NGOs.

There are many barriers to accessing these services. Gender and culture affect service seeking behaviours, along with distance and expenses for people living on outer islands or remote communities.

What the people in Tonga[tapu] need to understand is that most of these people do not have close relatives over there, no vehicle to keep going back and forward to the MIA office. It is another big expense for them to think of.

(Stakeholder)

Recommendations for consideration

- Adult cyber abuse poses serious safety concerns for scheme participants and their families, including mental health risks. Facebook users post images and pictures of PALM and RSE participants on public pages as a form of abuse and harassment. These actions are defined as adult cyber abuse by Tonga's Electronic Communication Abuse Offences Act and Australia's e-Safety Commissioner.⁵⁹ MIA and the Australian and New Zealand Governments should report Facebook pages (and especially those dedicated to posting explicit images of workers and which identify them personally) to the Office of the e-Safety commissioner Australia and Facebook, with a view to blocking or removing such pages. MIA to also consider how the Electronic Communication Abuse Offences Act can be utilised to minimise online harassment and harm.
- MIA and the Australian Government should prepare information and materials in Tongan on ways to report online adult harassment and abuse to the e-Safety Commissioner.

⁵⁶ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-topics/adult-cyber-abuse#what-is-adult-cyber-abuse>

⁵⁶ Noting that many participants had older or adult children.

- MIA should consider developing a dedicated standalone Tonga family support program for family members. This program should include community outreach support at the pre-departure, in Australia/New Zealand and return stages. Such a program would offer support to families before, during and after labour mobility including initial adjustment, transnational parenting during labour mobility, financial planning, mental health and reconnecting. This should be extended to include primary caregivers who are not parents. Such support could potentially include monthly/weekly visits to check that children are attending school and not experiencing neglect. The family support program should link with existing NGO and other supports including IOM reintegration initiatives.
- Worker and family support should be holistic and ongoing. As such MIA, with the funding support from bilateral donors, should progress existing policy to extend and formalise support for spouses and carers in Tonga, through church, community or MIA Welfare Unit activities and events.
- Relationship stress can occur when remittances are not as reasonably expected. The Australian Government should continue to strengthen existing compliance and assurance activities to ensure approved employers are meeting minimum hour obligations under the PALM Deed and Guidelines.

3. Care arrangements for children

The decision to participate in labour mobility is not an easy one for most parents. Parents experienced an internal negotiation between staying with their children or going on labour mobility to improve their economic well-being. Mothers and fathers also made choices over taking longer breaks between

seasonal work, or deciding not to go again, if their heart was telling them to be at home. Extended family members who played a caring role also influenced this decision.

Making this decision was talked about by 20% of parent participants (n=29) who cited competing priorities, circumstances and achievements, which changed over time. For example, mothers deciding to stay as they felt their older daughters needed female guidance, fathers taking longer breaks at home to address concerns over school performance, or new mothers delaying labour mobility until an infant is one year old.

- 24% of worker and families with children⁶⁰ (n=36 of 148) initiated discussion about missing their children, with six explicitly mentioning that separation became easier after an initial period of adjustment for themselves and their children.
- 21% (n=32) talked about being proud of their children's educational attainments due to labour mobility. Only a small number (n=5) expressed concerns over their children's performance and attendance at school.
- Nine participants expressed concerns over care arrangements including neglectful spouses who misused money to finance drug and alcohol habits (n=4) and concern over inadequate supervision (n=5).

Regular communication between parents and children was cited as essential for helping people stay connected, calm, and focused on their goals. For some people this meant calling numerous times a day, having video chat on throughout days off, or having their video chat on while sleeping to feel like they are next to their children.

Participants also talked about alternating their seasonal work with spouse, siblings, or parents/adult children so that one trusted carer could be at home with their dependents while the other was on labour mobility.

Why do parents and extended families experience challenges with care arrangements for children?

There is a level of stress involved as participants miss and worry about their children. The majority of parents weigh up the costs and benefits of leaving children to participate in labour migration. They also assess how suitable the arrangements for care are before they leave. For families with volatile dynamics, labour mobility may exacerbate the situation and have repercussions for the safety of children. This is particularly stressful when parents on labour mobility lose oversight of the care of their children, or carers in Tonga lose contact with those on labour mobility sending remittances.

One stakeholder discussed the general increase in concern over children's performance in school due to broken homes, but noted that broken homes included families who did not participate in labour mobility as well. Two fathers who saw their children's grades slipping, felt it was due to their absence as they were the ones who encouraged them to focus on their studies. One decided with his wife (who was also on labour mobility) to incentivise grades by paying \$100 for each child who got three As. The other decided to pay for external tutoring acknowledging that his wife was unable to take over this additional role.

Three parents expressed a concern that their partner (that remained in Tonga) did not spend enough quality time with their children and spent remittances on alcohol and parties. Four fathers, however, explicitly felt their relationships with their children became stronger when they were the primary care giver at home.

Overall, parents expressed feelings of sadness and guilt over being away from their children and had put suitable care arrangements in place for their departure. These arrangements included grandparent care and alternating mobilisations with the other spouse parent. Care of children was a primary inhibiting factor for women's participation. The number of cases involving potential child neglect was small, but serious.

Implications

Children were not involved in talanoa/interviews (as per research ethics) and the study was not longitudinal. As such the social impact of labour mobility on children was not a key focus of the research. Several studies have been conducted on this topic already, including in Tonga.⁶¹ The study findings do however point to particular challenges with care arrangements for children.

Parents felt there was an adjustment period with children when starting and returning from labour mobility. Upon return, three participants explicitly mentioned their children showing increased separation anxiety, preference for their labour mobility carers for comfort and rejection of parent's authority. Parents commented that relationships took time to go back to normal.

While explicit reference to child neglect was uncommon in the study data, the concerns raised over child welfare when children did not attend school, when children experienced stress due to physical or verbal abuse from carers, and when children were not the beneficiaries of intended remittances are serious. Some of these cases appeared to be related to events and relationship challenges that commenced well before one parent joined the PALM or RSE.

⁶¹ Cunningham, 2024; UNICEF, 2024.

⁶² <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/employers>

⁶³ Stakeholders previously referred to this as 'absconding'.

⁶⁴ Of the 89 participants that discussed disengagement.

⁶⁵ Several worker participants from two employers described this practice.

Some parents who participated in labour mobility and were not happy with the care arrangements of their children decided they would not engage in labour mobility again. This sentiment is also a reflection of some families living in unsafe environments, where safeguarding the children may be falling on a single individual.

Recommendations for consideration

- MIA should continue to undertake police checks to ensure that PALM and RSE applicants have no prior pending child protection and domestic and family violence court cases or orders. MIA should develop clear policies and processes regarding stand down in such cases.
- The Australian Government and MIA should consider enabling family reunification through a range of visa options and assess how upfront costs for visa applications can be minimised for PALM scheme participants spouses and family members.
- MIA should consider developing a dedicated standalone Tonga family support program for family members (as per previous recommendation).

4. Negative work experiences leading to disengagement

It is a condition of the PALM and RSE visas that scheme participants are employed only by their nominated employer, for a specific job, while in Australia or New Zealand.

Employers must be approved by the relevant government department in Australia or New Zealand in order to host workers.⁶² PALM and RSE visa holders are not permitted to remain in Australia if they are not working for their nominated approved employer.

Disengagement refers to when PALM or RSE workers leave an approved employer and remain in Australia or New Zealand without

the permission of the relevant Australian or New Zealand Government department to work for an employer other than that which was initially or subsequently approved.⁶³

Worker disengagement was discussed by 89 worker and family study participants. Most stakeholder participants also described how and why workers disengage. Of the 89 worker and family participants that discussed disengagement:

- 5 were PALM workers that had disengaged from the scheme
- 56 were co-workers of those that had disengaged
- 16 were separated spouses or immediate family members of those that had disengaged
- 12 had heard about disengagement from neighbours or in the media.

Why does disengagement happen?

Disengagement occurs where workers feel they are being treated unfairly, are not able to earn and achieve what they had reasonably expected in Australia or New Zealand, or fear repercussions for their actions through contract termination or blacklisting.

52% of worker and family participants⁶⁴ identified work issues as the primary reason for disengagement. Work issues include insufficient hours, low pay/high deductions, finding the work physically challenging, unresponsiveness from the labour hire company onsite manager to support issue resolution, verbal abuse by supervisors and fears of contract termination due to poor performance.

In Australia, the practice of some employers⁶⁵ sending workers home without discussion, sometimes after two warnings related to performance, also prompted workers to disengage.

One guy disengaged because he was very sick and had a sore head. He asked to be excused from work at the office. They would not let him go home and told him must stay at work. He was groaning and in pain and so he climbed the fence to be able to leave the premises and go home. He came back to work once he was better and was told by the employer to go back home because he was being punished and not able to work, he had to disengage.

(Woman, long-term PALM, meat processing)

We have noticed that there have been a few workers who were sacked from work. I am not an expert to fully understand the contract, but I think that the workers have a right to question the reasons why the employer wants to lay them off. What I have observed is that there is no opportunity given to the workers to appeal or even to question decisions made against them. There have been changes to our contract but again, they tell us that there are changes but they rush through that. There is no opportunity for questions, and I feel that we are not given the opportunity to ask questions. The agent [labour hire company representative] rushed through what has changed and ask us to sign the contract. We are not happy with the process, but we have to sign, otherwise we are told to go home.

(Male, long-term PALM, meat processing)

All five disengaged workers interviewed cited workplace issues as the reason for disengagement. Two had submitted a written resignation letter to their employer and remained in Australia working for another employer. They were satisfied with their new employment, were earning good income and continuing to remit money to their family in Tonga. These participants did not perceive

that they had disengaged as they had not left their approved employer without notice.⁶⁶

- 15% of worker and family participants identified extra marital affairs as the reason why people disengaged from the scheme.
- 12% identified that disengagement was premeditated and workers left as soon as they arrived in Australia, or shortly after.
- 11% identified that diaspora were the main reason that people disengaged (including relatives living in Australia and also church members that encouraged workers to leave the scheme).

Co-workers of those that disengaged described being one of only a few workers left from a cohort, with most having disengaged. They explained that not everyone left for the same reason, or in the same timeframe. Some stayed in the same state where they were mobilised to and found better work opportunities, while others moved to larger cities and primarily Sydney to be with relatives.

There is also a cultural dimension to a person's decision to disengage. Within Tongan culture it is important to avoid misbehaviour in front of others as these actions bring shame to the individual and to their families and communities.⁶⁷ This may in part explain why people who experience workplace performance issues, or who have engaged in culturally taboo relationships, decide to leave their workplace and Tongan co-workers. Approximately 28% of all study participants discussed being affected by gossip, or group shaming.

Not everyone who experiences workplace issues disengages. Workers that had not disengaged also experienced similar

⁶⁶ Noting that leaving with notice to work for another employer without approval from the Australian Government is a breach of PALM visa conditions.

⁶⁷ Nishitani, 2014.

⁶⁸ IRD data

challenges in Australia and New Zealand but had decided to remain with their employer. In the PALM scheme, 34% of short-term workers identified that they did not receive enough hours, while 35% of long-term workers identified problems with their pay (compared to 28.7% of short-term PALM and 25.4% of RSE workers), primarily due to unauthorised deductions, low pay or pay rates. Finally, 29% of long-term PALM workers identified issues with health and wellbeing at work (compared to 16% and 14% in short-term PALM and RSE respectively).

Stream and scheme differences

OED welfare data shows a much higher prevalence of disengagement (as a total proportion of the overall worker cohort) among long-term PALM compared to the short-term stream. According to participants interviewed in this study this is largely due to 1) the working conditions in abattoirs, including the nature of the work and workplace culture and 2) the prevalence of labour hire companies in meat processing which affects the relationship between workers and their host employer. Issues mainly arise when onsite managers are unresponsive or unable to resolve issues after repeated requests by workers over several months.

Although there was a degree of workplace dissatisfaction among horticulture workers in Australia and New Zealand, this was not to the same degree as meat process workers on the long-term PALM scheme.

In addition, disengagement rates are much higher in the PALM scheme compared to the RSE scheme.⁶⁸ There are several differences between the PALM and RSE schemes that contribute to this discrepancy.

First, the availability of support mechanisms. In New Zealand there are three Pacific liaison officers for a population of around 2,000 workers at any given time, and a smaller geography to cover. In Australia there are

two part-time country liaison officers for a population of around 4,000 workers at any given time, and much larger geographies to reach/cover.

Second, workers in New Zealand's RSE scheme described high levels of control by approved employers. Workers commented that their employment contract would be immediately terminated, and a return flight booked to Tonga for any digression from rules such as the prohibition of drinking alcohol, misconduct outside of work, or performance issues at work. The New Zealand Government currently requires employers to sign a guarantee as part of the ATR to pay the repatriation costs of any worker that breaks their visa condition, which can be upwards of NZD\$3,000. While this strategy may seem to have the desired effect of minimising worker disengagement, tight controls on workers can also have negative outcomes for worker wellbeing and mental health.

Implications

Disengagement from the RSE and PALM scheme is a breach of the individuals' visa conditions. There are also economic and social impacts for women and children. In the case of those that disengaged due to work-related issues (52%), they continued to be employed in Australia and send remittances to family in Tonga. For those that had disengaged due to relationship breakdown (11%), many ceased contact with spouses and children and stopped sending remittances.

Recommendations for consideration

- MIA should undertake biannual Government of Tonga welfare visits to Australia to meet with workers (including those that have disengaged), listen to and resolve issues. These visits must include the MIA Welfare Coordinator and/or Officer. Visits should also systematically collect data on welfare cases to analyse trends, underlying causes and identify mitigating strategies.

- MIA should encourage and monitor joint ATRs and recruitment plan approvals to ensure fair working conditions.
- MIA, with Australian Government support, should consider appointing additional full time Tongan CLOs in Australia proportional to the number of workers. CLOs should be full time and based in areas where most Tongan workers are located.
- MIA, with bilateral donor support, should consider employing women CLOs in New Zealand and Australia. The number of Tongan women CLOs should be proportionate to the number of Tongan women in PALM and RSE.
- The Australian and New Zealand Governments should consider ensuring that workers are provided with accurate and ongoing information on work contracts and visa conditions. This must be provided in language with a culturally responsive and strengths-based approach.
- MIA should consider reviewing and amending the current Government of Tonga blacklisting policy. The policy should ensure that a) workers have a right to present their case b) that investigations and discussions are confidential and formally documented c) that a worker has a right of appeal to any decision regarding blacklisting, and d) that a panel of nominated MIA and NGO representatives (i.e. the labour mobility steering committee welfare sub-committee or similar body) review blacklisting decisions.

I also would like to ask our Tongan government, when they draw up their budgets, to please visit the families of workers who complain in Tonga. That would help them understand the cause of the problems and even come to talk to group leaders who are here in Australia on ways they can help.

(Male, long-term PALM, meat processing)

5. Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination is exclusion or restriction made on the basis of gender that creates barriers for girls, boys, women and/or men to access opportunities and resources. Opportunities and challenges of PALM scheme participation are shaped by gender norms. This includes the ability for women to undertake PALM or RSE work, limited support-seeking behaviours for women who are pregnant and financial stress for women who remain at home when relationships separate and spouses stop remitting money to support children. Many of the other opportunities and challenges identified in this report are interconnected with gender discrimination.

Recruitment

Tonga has a particularly low rate of women's participation in the RSE (11%) and short-term PALM scheme (21%). By comparison, rates of participation in the long-term PALM stream are much higher (at 37%) than the average women's participation rate across the PALM scheme (21%).

The study identifies that women are underrepresented in short-term horticulture work for two gender-related reasons. First, 24 participants identified that either they or their wives or sisters had expressed a desire to participate in labour mobility, but were not permitted to by their husbands or brothers. Reasons cited included concerns over misconduct and affairs, and that the work was too difficult and could not be performed by women. Second, employers in New Zealand and to a lesser extent Australia were perceived to be recruiting men only – noting that this practice is inconsistent with Australian and New Zealand anti-discrimination law – to combat possible behavioural issues among workers.

Worker and family views regarding women's participation in the scheme were equally gendered. Women were overwhelmingly

blamed for negative issues and coping behaviours, particularly as social norms in Tonga regarding conduct are much stricter for women compared to men.

So at times, this is why there are marital problems and affairs, as I see the issue, I think it depends on the women as when they get drunk they go from one house to the other, and men will fall because of this.

(Woman, spouse of RSE worker, horticulture)

If you have a girl in the team, then you have a problem. Every time you go around, you're working alongside them, you're beside them all the time eating all the time, talking all the time. I think it causes problems.

(Male, RSE, horticulture)

By comparison, women in long-term PALM employed in meat processing were either young women that were not married and participated with their parents' consent or had travelled with their husband as a couple.

Pregnancy and reproductive health

Pregnancy and childbirth is a normal part of adult life for many families. Of the worker and family participants, 13% (n=29) discussed either themselves, a family member or a co-worker becoming pregnant during their time in Australia on the PALM scheme.⁶⁹

Many pregnancies (including those between de facto couples) were unplanned. Due to cultural views on pregnancy outside of marriage in Tonga, and the limited reproductive health services in Tonga and in regional Australia, many women do not seek support in Australia either to discuss safe intimate relationships, or after becoming pregnant. Most PALM and RSE scheme support for workers — such as team leaders and country liaison officers — is male dominated.

In several cases women disengaged from the PALM scheme due to fear of being returned home, blacklisting or negative community reactions in Tonga.⁷⁰ In such cases, the provision of gender-responsive support through formal services — including a female country liaison officer, the team leader and the approved employer — may encourage and enable women to remain with their PALM scheme employer.

We had a case where a female worker was pregnant, and she was told that she was going back to Tonga on that day. When the person from the office went out to do something while the worker packed, she returned to find that the worker had ran away.... we found out later that she was well and safe in Sydney.

(Woman, long-term PALM, meat processing)

Participants also discussed men engaging in risky intimate relationship behaviours including multiple relationships with different women and paying for entertainment services.

That's one of the impact of the scheme, is men going overseas, being unfaithful, and bringing that impact back into the country, spreading the STIs around.

(Stakeholder)

⁶⁹ Pregnancy was less common in the RSE scheme due to the low number of women participating.

⁷⁰ This is not to suggest that any of these concerns would have occurred, rather that pregnant PALM and RSE participants were concerned that they may happen.

When he came back last year, he came back in September. I know for sure he was having an affair with a different lady. And I'm just glad that I went to do a checkup, honestly for my health conditions. I found out that he was doing that behind my back, so I went to [organisation] to do a checkup on myself.

(Woman, spouse of short-term PALM participant in horticulture)

Participants who discussed these issues identified the importance of primary health services. Not only is the provision of these services important in Tonga before departure and after arrival home, including for workers and their partners, but these services must also be accessible in Australia. This is particularly challenging given that many workers are located in remote and isolated locations where provision of basic primary health care is limited. In addition to the provision of services, acceptability of accessing such services is also a key barrier.

Remittances withholding

Remittances withholding occurs when someone engaged in labour mobility stops sending money home. This is usually a result of relationship breakdown and particularly impacts women taking care of their families back in Tonga. Remittances may be withheld when spouses suddenly stop contact and sending money, or when remittances

are redirected to other family members rather than the primary carer of children. Participants said their spouses stopped contact, predominantly after engaging in extra marital affairs. In these instances, the spouse is left in a precarious situation of losing the main income earner, while shouldering the ongoing costs of the family.

There were 16 instances of remittances withholding or cessation to spouses who remained in Tonga with primary caring responsibility for children, including 14 men and two women. A small number of women reported that men had requested divorces to avoid 'blacklisting'. In addition, men that had left their spouses during labour mobility rarely continued to financially support their children and had little if any contact with them. Although Australia has reciprocal arrangements with many countries regarding child support payments, Tonga is not currently a signatory to these arrangements.

NGO stakeholders discussed these issues in detail, describing the increase in cases of women requesting assistance for child support when they are forced out of homes that is the husbands' land and property. MIA-OED Welfare Unit data reported 16 cases in total, with most reported in 2017. While the number of cases is likely to be small, the impacts on women and children are significant, including financial stress and poor mental health.

Why does gender discrimination happen?

A striking 13% of all participants attributed challenges on the PALM and RSE scheme to the participation of women, and their behaviours – primarily intimate relationships and pregnancy. A number of participants spoke of behaviours that were not compliant with the MIA code of conduct (but were not illegal in Australia or New Zealand), that involved both men and women; however, the view of these participants was that women should be prevented from participating. Men, primarily, held this view. Another reason

that study participants identified was that women should remain at home to care for the children while men went out to work.

Some approved employers were thought by participants to hold the same opinions, with examples given of women intentionally not being recruited as a strategy to manage worker behaviours.

The increased use of social media to facilitate gender-based harassment and discrimination of PALM and RSE scheme participants was raised by many stakeholders. Social media – and particular Facebook pages targeting labour mobility participants – was also contributing to mental health concerns and issues among workers. Technology-facilitated gender-based harassment contributes significantly to perceptions of social issues that are not substantiated by this study including large-scale family breakdown.

In sum, gender discrimination in the PALM and RSE occurs due to:

- persistent gender norms about the appropriate and acceptable behaviours for women and men in society
- the challenges of performing these roles in a new culture and environment
- employer's gender-based attitudes and assumptions about why people engage in coping behaviours
- the reluctance of some employers to provide or ensure access to appropriate supports for workers when they face challenges
- technology-assisted gender-based harassment and violence.

Implications

Gender discrimination leads to negative social impacts (or inhibits positive social impacts) when women and men do not engage in support-seeking behaviours due to gender and cultural norms. Support-seeking behaviour includes acting on the desire to

undertake labour mobility to increase access to economic resources.

There are clear interconnections between gender discrimination and the opportunities and challenges of labour mobility already identified in this report. For example, social restrictions – from spouses, brothers and approved employers – on women's participation in the PALM and RSE scheme has limited women's ability to achieve the same improvements in socio-economic status as men. For those that have participated in the scheme, feelings of confidence, capability and self-worth are especially striking.

In the case of coping behaviours and relationship stress, women were twice as likely as men to identify the need for someone to talk to, and to receive support from family members. This may also speak to men's reluctance to seek support when needed. When spouses do separate, women are most often impacted financially. Women may struggle to engage in the paid workforce given that they have less opportunity to participate in PALM and RSE schemes and have a higher burden of unpaid care.

Recommendations for consideration

- Adult and gender-based cyber abuse poses serious safety concerns for scheme participants and their families, including mental health risks. Facebook users post images and pictures of PALM and RSE participants on public pages as a form of abuse and harassment. These actions are defined as adult cyber abuse by Tonga's Electronic Communication Abuse Offences Act and Australia's e-Safety Commissioner. MIA and the Australian and New Zealand Governments should report Facebook pages (and especially those dedicated to posting explicit images of workers and which identify them personally) to the Office of the e-Safety commissioner Australia and Facebook, with a view to blocking or removing such pages. MIA to also consider how the Electronic



Communication Abuse Offences Act can be utilised to minimise online harassment and harm.

- MIA and the Australian and New Zealand Governments to prepare information and materials in Tongan on ways to report online adult harassment and abuse to the e-Safety Commissioner.
- The Australian and New Zealand Governments should provide funding to Tongan NGOs providing SRH support to expand services for PALM and RSE workers, including participation in pre-departure activities and ongoing activities for families and returned workers. Investment should also be considered for outreach programs at younger age groups to enable potential scheme participants, and especially women, to make informed decisions about their bodies.
- The Australian and New Zealand Governments should take additional measures – beyond current compliance and assurance activities – to ensure that employers are complying with Australian and New Zealand equal opportunity and employment legislation. MIA-OED staff should receive training on this legislation.
- MIA and the Australian Government should work with existing partners in Tonga,

NIB and service providers in Australia to improve access to reproductive health services and allow PALM scheme workers with choices for their SRH.

- MIA and the Australian Government should work with NIB and service providers in Australia to ensure that mental health awareness and support activities are available.
- The Government of Tonga should consider entering into reciprocal arrangements with the Australian Government regarding child support payments in cases of family separation or divorce.
- MIA, with the support of the Australian and New Zealand Governments, should consider appointing several women country liaison officers for Australia and New Zealand based in locations where there are large concentrations of Tongan PALM and RSE participants.
- Tongan NGOs should work closely with relevant Australian and New Zealand NGOs to develop and deliver outreach pilot support for men and boys encountering stress or other issues across the labour mobility journey. This pilot would include creating psychologically safe spaces to engage in discussions about men and masculinity

From challenges and opportunities to social impacts

PALM and RSE participation results in a range of opportunities and challenges – but these are not social impacts. Opportunities and challenges are the beginning of a causal pathway that may lead to a larger impact for families and communities. Engagement and access to appropriate support and connection can determine the extent to which opportunities and challenges become larger positive or negative social impacts.

There are two key impact pathways identified in this study: one positive and one negative.

Improved socio-economic status is the primary positive impact of labour mobility for families and communities in Tonga. Participation in PALM and RSE does not, however, automatically result in improved socio-economic status for every individual. Rather, when there is a strong connection to family and faith there is also a personal responsibility to fulfil obligations, as an important cultural practice. This strong connection is necessary to turn the opportunity or event of labour mobility into a larger scale social impact.

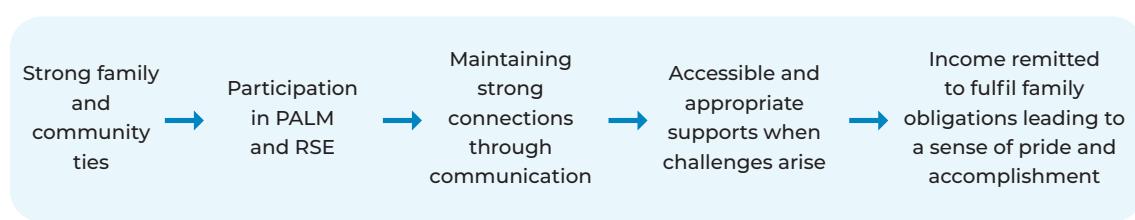


Figure 7. Causal pathway for improved socio-economic status

Uneven distribution of labour mobility gains is the primary negative impact of PALM and RSE schemes for families and communities in Tonga. This occurs primarily due to gender discrimination and inadequate support services for scheme participants and their families.

Gender norms prevent many women from participating in labour mobility, including norms perpetuated by communities, families and employers in New Zealand and Australia.

When Tongan women do navigate these norms and engage in labour mobility, positive changes in socio-economic status are evident. These changes, however, are undermined by gender discrimination during labour mobility. This discrimination includes harassment and lack of access to gender-sensitive support services. Gender-based adult cyber abuse and access to sexual and reproductive health services are particularly problematic.

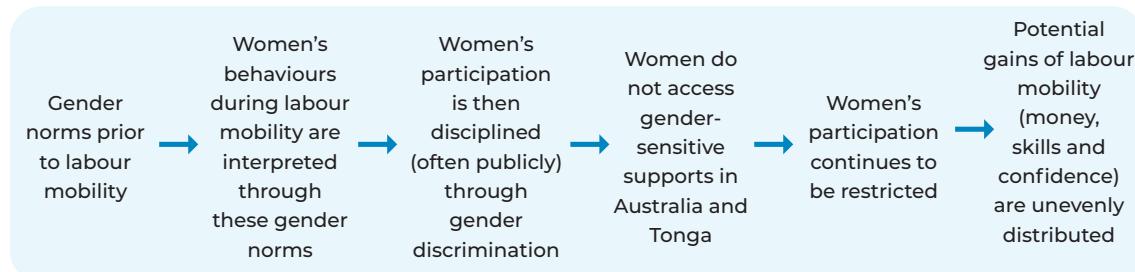


Figure 8. Causal pathway for gender discrimination



When PALM and RSE participants have accessible, culturally responsive and gender-sensitive supports, the impact of gender discrimination is minimised. For example, women may become pregnant during labour mobility, outside of accepted cultural norms. When this occurs, the provision reproductive health services and contact with a female country liaison officer may provide the medical and emotional support required to continue with their employer.

Alternatively, the lack of support may prompt women to disengage from the scheme and not seek the medical care required (as health insurance is cancelled and PALM workers are not entitled to Medicare). Gender discrimination affects the individual while also inhibiting opportunities for other women to participate. This is due to the false confirmation of persistent gender norms, such as women are not suited to labour mobility work or life.

Participation in PALM and RSE doesn't automatically result in the impact. Rather, established norms prior to labour mobility are either challenged or reaffirmed through the experiences of PALM and RSE scheme participants in Australia and New Zealand.

Finally, there is considerable interconnection between challenges and opportunities such that they should not be considered in isolation. For example, the relationship between coping behaviours, negative work experiences and relationship stress is high. When people do not receive enough hours at work or have issues with excessive or incorrect deductions, this causes stress between married couples. In turn, workers engage in coping behaviours to manage this stress without access to support to better manage or mitigate the issues – particularly as scheme participants are often based in remote areas. As a result, a person may decide to disengage from the scheme to find more consistent and better paid work to alleviate the strain on a relationship.

Equally, improved socio-economic status is not guaranteed through participation in labour mobility. The interplay between goal setting, good communication, trust and good financial management can see significant improvements in personal and family circumstances. Such benefits are less likely when workers are unable to earn sufficient wages or see their remittances mismanaged by receiving family members. These challenges can negate the potential benefits, where support is lacking to help individuals plan and manage their labour mobility journey.

The causal pathway in each case is different. But in each case PALM and RSE participation (the act of being 'on' labour mobility) is only one of many factors leading to the impact. **As such, the physical separation associated with being away in Australia or New Zealand for work does not directly cause social impacts, but it is one of many factors.**

Enhancing support and connection

Many workers manage to succeed in fulfilling personal aspirations and the expectations of families, communities and employers during labour mobility. Others grapple with new freedoms and the challenges of labour mobility including isolation, homesickness and culture shock. The study overwhelmingly finds that scheme participants are often unable to access available supports to navigate these challenges. This does not suggest that the support structures are not in place through each of the schemes. Rather, contextual factors in Tonga and Australia/New Zealand inhibit the quantity, quality and accessibility of the available supports. These factors may also inhibit the support-seeking behaviours of some scheme participants.

When PALM and RSE scheme workers and their families can access culturally appropriate and responsive supports, life events leading to negative social impacts are minimised. Support systems include both community and organisation, and informal and formal. In Tonga, participants discussed either receiving or wanting support from family, neighbours, the church, NGOs and MIA-OED. In Australia and New Zealand, assistance was often provided by co-workers, team leaders, diaspora, employers and country liaison officers. There were, however, considerable gaps and limitations to this support.

MIA-OED and Tongan NGOs

A small number of participants had contacted services in Tonga for support while in Australia or when returning home to Tonga. At present returning workers are not currently offered support services or counselling. Some workers do contact non-government organisations for support, however there is no mechanism for referral by MIA including in cases of traumatic events.

At present, much emphasis is placed on the pre-departure briefing to ensure that PALM and RSE participants have access to the

information needed during labour mobility. The current pre-departure briefing conducted in Tonga by MIA-OED covers a range of topics and is relatively comprehensive. MIA-OED invite a range of PALM scheme stakeholders to present on various topics, including the Salvation Army, Tonga Family Health Association and financial institutions.

Various participants described the information and support services provided as different, yet complementary. Participants described the need to strengthen support for workers and their families across the labour mobility system in Tonga and Australia for both PALM and RSE participants and their families. For example, counselling referrals by MIA were seen as a positive development, however there are only a few trained counsellors in Tonga.

Several participants described serious and traumatic events that they had encountered while in Australia and New Zealand. These include deaths of coworkers and friends (at work or at employer-provided accommodation), worker death by suicide, domestic violence and workplace violence. These deeply traumatic events require a specialised and long-term response from services in Australia and Tonga. Yet none of the workers or stakeholders involved received professional counselling in Australia, received limited support in Australia, and received almost no formalised support on return.

Country liaison officers

Much responsibility for worker support in Australia and New Zealand falls to the country liaison officers. At the time of this study there were three country liaison officers in New Zealand and two in Australia. All officers are Ministry of Internal Affairs staff members. In Australia the country liaison officers support almost 4,000 workers that are dispersed across a large geographic area, which makes reaching workers in person difficult. The

two country liaison officers in Australia are employed part time and have additional community and work responsibilities.

Smaller distances and fewer workers in New Zealand mean that country liaison officer support was more responsive and proactive.

In addition, many of the life events encountered by women PALM and RSE participants or family members are culturally sensitive topics. As women explained, they often do not feel comfortable to speak to men about these issues – and particularly church leaders.⁷¹

Friends, family and community

Notably, 17% of workers and family members felt that they needed someone to talk to about the issues they were encountering. People often reached out to neighbours, friends and occasionally church Ministers for this support. Workers and their family members frequently suggested during interviews that counselling should be made widely available in Tonga and in Australia.

Although family and community support has played an important part in supporting labour mobility participants, there is a limit to the ability of families to provide this support at scale. In addition, workers and their families often require access to formalised and professional support through counselling.

Having a counsellor would make working at [employer] better. It would even be helpful for those on fruit picking. Because all I hear from the Tongans is problem, problem, problem. But what should we do to fix those problems?

(Woman, long-term PALM, meat processing)

We go to our team leader who can only do so much. There's no one else here to help.

Our supervisor is sometimes good but if your supervisor does not care, they will just ignore you.

(Woman, long term PALM, meat processing)

Researcher: *What kind of support do you think you need, or your family while you are in the program?*

Participant: *I would like to see visits like this. It is always good to know that we have not being forgotten. It is always good to talk to someone about your issues and frustrations.*

(Woman, long-term PALM, meat processing)

Team leaders

Team leaders are an important and frontline support function within the PALM and RSE schemes. Both MIA-OED and approved employers rely on team leaders to support other workers with work issues and life problems, assist with recruitment and minimise worker conflicts. The MIA-OED Operations Manual identifies the role of team leaders and there is a specific MIA-OED Team Leader Code of Conduct.

Although team leaders play a central role in frontline support and managing workplace issues, they receive no training or ongoing

⁷¹ Women workers and family members, however, were more than willing to discuss these life events and their impacts with the female research team.

support. Some employers pay team leaders for their extra roles and responsibilities ranging from AUD20 to 100 per week. Most team leaders receive no extra pay.

Team leaders are selected primarily through the following:

- employers choose based on experience, character and work ethic.
- some team leaders are voted in by their cohort.
- some are recruited and select their cohort.

Team leaders with excellent leadership skills are extremely effective and supportive for coworkers and employers alike. Participants said they valued when their team leaders could listen to and respect them, speak patiently and empathetically, and encourage positive behaviour by reminding them of their goals and family members at home. This in turn creates a cohesive team, who are well supported to navigate the various choices and challenges throughout labour mobility.

I think our team leader is really good. His leadership is cool and controlled ... It's his voice. It's understanding of the workers, especially the younger ones. Getting us all united ... we have lots of meetings, and he's good at reinforcing important points. On Sundays he calls meetings and we all come together and we have prayers. He tells us what the work will be like the following week. It's the relationship building between him and the rest of the group that works.

(Male, RSE, horticulture)

Team leaders experience pressure from above and below. They feel blamed by employers if something goes wrong with a group member. Consequently, some team leaders have a tough stance and see their role as rule maker and discipline giver.

Team leaders are not always in a position of power to advocate for team members, and coworkers can feel frustrated when issues arise. Tension can arise when team leaders try

to enforce unreasonable rules. For example, forcing group members to go to worship when they needed to rest. Sometimes leaders lose respect of team members by:

- displaying jealousy of other group members who have natural leadership
- gossiping about people who have come to them to share problems
- using their power for personal gain, climbing the ranks to get closer to the owner.

Team leaders sometimes did not action complaints brought by their co-workers. In these instances, team members expressed frustration that their elected representative was indifferent to their needs, or too closely affiliated with or intimidated by the employer to offer any support.

What we were told in Tonga was not what actually happened. We raised it in Australia and it was very disheartening that this was happening and no proper response. Our Leader did not take up what we raised and was unreliable.

(Male, RSE and short-term PALM, horticulture)

Team leaders have various strategies for providing support and guidance:

- discussions over goals and working hard to send back money
- explaining and demonstrating how to be efficient
- hosting social nights to keep morale up (that either do or do not allow alcohol)
- enforcing strict rules and using physical violence to punish team members for drinking
- gaining respect
- listening when people need to share and talk
- putting team members/workers first and advocating for them to benefit from their employment



- passing on messages if contacted by spouses but staying out of personal business.

Gender, age, and experience on the scheme may affect whether a nominated team leader will be listened to or not. Confidence in speaking English is another important factor.

Whenever we see our pay being deducted by the owner and ask our leader about it, it was no use he could not seem to fight for us and maybe it was because he could not speak good English. It was terrible because every time we have a problem with the deductions being too much and we wanted to know why, our group leader couldn't do anything about it.

(Woman, long-term PALM, meat processing)

A small number of participants suggested that team leaders should receive training about how to help workers with certain issues, particularly around hours and pay, so they can respond quickly. There was no evidence that team leaders received training in accidental counselling or were able to access counselling support themselves.

Recommendations for consideration

Key principles

In response to the perceived increase in negative social behaviours, employers and governments have implemented a range of policies aimed at penalising those who engage in these behaviours or stopping them before they occur (i.e. alcohol bans, zero tolerance policies and blacklisting). Evidence from this study suggests that these policies are ineffective when accountability and support structures are absent.

Moreover, they may lead to a fear of disclosure of some issues – particularly those that are more ‘sensitive’, such as pregnancy and gender-based violence – and increased disengagement. A system that focuses on supporting people without judgment, rather than addressing problems, is more likely to enhance trust in key PALM stakeholders – encouraging people to seek support and minimising the negative social impacts of life events over time.

Some participants – including stakeholders, workers and team leaders – commented that these stringent rules and regulations did not work, and often exacerbated particular behaviours.

I found that trying to control people encourages them to break the rules and try to get out. I saw that in other groups when I went to Australia. When they tightened control, told them not to do this, not to do that, it leads them to test these things when they don't have any freedoms.

(Male team leader, RSE and short-term PALM, horticulture)

The Tongan way is to make something strict but in this instance it doesn't work.

(Woman, short-term PALM, horticulture)

We had that briefing beforehand, no drinking, no smoking, nothing like that. It's like if you're given permission you do it, and if you're not given permission, you still do it.

(Male, RSE horticulture)

The recommendations outlined in this report focus on a people-centred approach to enhancing the benefits and minimising the risks of labour mobility. Several study participants — stakeholders in frontline support roles — identified the need to shift from looking at problems to supporting people. As one Tongan church leader and senior government official commented:

We should always put the client at the centre. I know we all make mistakes. And it's hard when you know it's not you that's the problem, but it's your friends, or church members. So, when the person comes for any problem the church and village leaders should only ever focus on the person. Leave the problem aside. Heal them. Heal the person. Make them grow again, to stand up and walk again.

(Church leader)

A people-centred approach to minimising the impact of negative life events ensures that people are able to receive preventative support before events happen, and support (without judgment or penalty) after events have occurred. Key to preventative support is the continuation, or re-establishment if required, of cultural, community and spiritual connections throughout the labour mobility journey.

Key recommendation: Towards an integrated Tonga-Australia/New Zealand community of care

To minimise the challenges experienced by labour mobility participants and subsequent social impacts, the Tongan, Australian and New Zealand Governments should consider developing and initiating a holistic community of care. A community of care approach focuses on enhancing wellbeing and agency through connected and coordinated community-level support and preventative activities. It acknowledges that no single stakeholder can promote the

wellbeing of all PALM scheme workers and their families. A community of care is not one employer providing support to PALM or RSE workers through a welfare officer or onsite manager – this is just one small, yet important, aspect of a community of care approach.

The approach focuses on enhancing local connections and capacity across Australia and the Pacific to ensure PALM scheme participants and their families have access to a wide range of early, preventative and connected supports.

This community of care model engages a range of government, non-government services and community stakeholders in Tonga and Australia to ensure holistic preventative and responsive supports are available to PALM and RSE participants and their families. Central to a community of care is the identification, integration and coordination of formal and informal supports.

Certain community of care partners will play a key role in responding to welfare concerns arising in-country. These organisations are referral partners – such as family support/crisis centres, health, police, legal– and may be involved in case management of families referred to them by the OED. A community of care also ensures that clear referral pathways are set out for the most appropriate specialist service providers to assist with responding to welfare complaints. Referral pathways should make clear the protocols for triaging complaints following a response and escalation framework.

Some of the PALM and RSE support framework is already operating in Tonga and Australia and New Zealand. In rural and regional locations in both Australia and Tonga, services are limited, if available at all. This includes formalised services such as health care, and PALM-specific supports such as country liaison officers. Even where supports are available, many workers and families in this study explained that they had not

accessed them –because they did not know about them, did not feel comfortable using them, or had requested assistance and did not receive a response or any support.

This problem is twofold. First, existing supports are often not meeting worker needs. Second, workers and family members sometimes do not seek support due to a range of factors including gender, workplace dynamics and cultural norms.

To establish or strengthen a community of care in the PALM and RSE scheme context, investments may be required by bilateral donors to:

- facilitate coordination among community of care stakeholders (within and between each country including Tonga, Australia and New Zealand)
- creates spaces for joint dialogue, coordination and development of approaches to specific wellbeing issues such as mental health and sexual and reproductive health
- ensure that stakeholders have the necessary resources to provide support and services,
- support the care system to enhance support seeking behaviours among workers.

The proposed Tonga-Australia/New Zealand community of care would engage a range of stakeholders to identify support gaps and develop an approach to mitigate them. The community of care model would also enable more regular discussion among diverse stakeholders about welfare issues in the PALM scheme and how to address them.

The study recommends the following key guiding principles for the Tonga-Australia community of care be considered:

- Tongan PALM scheme participants and their families should assist in developing the framework.

- Supports should be accessible, gender-sensitive, culturally responsive and strengths-based.
- Equal focus should be placed on prevention and response.
- Development of the framework should be led by MIA with DFAT, MFAT and PLF support.
- Churches, NGOs, and district and town officers should be included in developing the community of care approach.

Summary of recommendations for consideration

High priority

1. MIA should consider developing a **dedicated standalone Tonga family support program** for family members. This program should include community outreach support at the pre-departure, in Australia/New Zealand and return stages. Such a program would offer support to families before, during and after labour mobility including initial adjustment, transnational parenting during labour mobility, financial planning, mental health and reconnecting. This should be extended to include primary caregivers who are not parents. Such support could potentially include monthly/weekly visits to check that children are attending school and not experiencing neglect. The family support program should link with existing NGO and other supports including International Organization for Migration reintegration initiatives.
2. MIA should initiate **biannual welfare monitoring visits** to Australia to meet with workers (including those who have disengaged) and listen to and resolve issues. These visits must include the MIA Welfare Coordinator or Officer. Visits should also systematically collect data on welfare cases to analyse trends, underlying

causes and identify mitigating strategies. Welfare monitoring visits should be aligned with CLO support.

3. MIA, with bilateral donor support, should appoint **additional full time Tongan CLOs** in Australia proportional to the number of workers. CLOs should be full time and based in areas where most Tongan workers are located. **Women CLOs should be appointed** in New Zealand and Australia, proportionate to the number of Tongan women in PALM and RSE.
4. Adult and gender-based cyber abuse poses serious safety concerns for scheme participants and their families, including mental health risks. Facebook users post images and pictures of PALM and RSE participants on public pages as a form of abuse and harassment. These actions are defined as adult cyber abuse by Tonga's Electronic Communication Abuse Offences Act and Australia's e-Safety Commissioner. MIA and the Australian and New Zealand Governments should **report Facebook pages** (especially those dedicated to posting explicit, identifiable images of workers) to the Office of the e-Safety commissioner Australia and Facebook, with a view to block or remove such pages. MIA to also consider how the Electronic Communication Abuse Offences Act can be used to minimise online harassment and harm.
5. MIA should continue to undertake **police checks** to ensure that PALM and RSE applicants have no prior pending child protection and domestic and family violence course cases or orders. MIA should develop clear policies and processes regarding stand down in such cases.
6. MIA, with the support of the Australian and New Zealand Governments, should develop a **comprehensive system for team leader support** including leadership and other training, de-briefing and

counselling. This support would ensure that team leaders are adequately recognised and remunerated for their considerable extra responsibilities.

7. MIA should consider **reviewing and amending the current Government of Tonga blacklisting policy**. The policy should ensure that a) workers have a right to present their case b) that investigations and discussions are confidential and formally documented c) that a worker has a right of appeal to any decision regarding blacklisting, and d) that a panel of nominated MIA and NGO representatives (i.e. the labour mobility steering committee welfare sub-committee or similar body) reviews blacklisting decisions.
8. The Australian and New Zealand Governments should expand the current system of **accommodation review and auditing**. This would include undertaking regular on-site accommodation audits of an agreed proportion of high to medium risk employer-provided accommodation. Concerns raised by workers – direct, or through a variety of channels – about accommodation quality, safety and excessive costs should continue to be investigated immediately. Employers should be breached where accommodation is not to the standard as required in the Deed and Guidelines.
9. Relationship stress can occur when remittances are not as reasonably expected. The Australian Government and New Zealand Government should continue to strengthen existing compliance and assurance activities to ensure approved **employers are meeting minimum hour obligations** under the PALM Deed and Guidelines.
10. Australian and New Zealand Governments should take additional measures – beyond current compliance and assurance activities – to ensure that employers

are complying with Australian and New Zealand **equal opportunity and employment legislation**. MIA-OED staff should receive training on this legislation.

11. MIA should **encourage and monitor joint ATRs and recruitment plan approvals** to ensure fair working conditions.

Medium priority

12. The Australian and New Zealand Government should **provide funding to Tongan NGOs providing SRH support to expand services** for PALM and RSE workers, including participation in pre-departure and ongoing activities for families and returned workers. Investment should also be considered in outreach programs for younger age groups to enable potential scheme participants, and especially women, to make informed decisions about their bodies.
13. MIA and the Australian Government should work with existing partners in Tonga, NIB and service providers in Australia to **improve access to reproductive health services** and allowing PALM workers with choices for their SRH.
14. Tongan NGOs should, with support from bilateral donors, work closely with relevant Australian and New Zealand servicers, including Pacific Island Councils, to develop and deliver **outreach pilot support for men and boys encountering stress** or other issues across the labour mobility journey. This pilot would include creating psychologically safe spaces to engage in discussions about men and masculinity.
15. MIA, with the funding assistance of the Australian and New Zealand Governments, should **strengthen decentralised application, mobilisation, and pre-departure services** and support to ensure that families in outer islands can participate in these activities. MIA offices in outer islands would require



additional support and funding to provide these services. Although a relatively comprehensive range of services are provided in Vava'u, only limited services are available in other islands. Despite the availability of services, participants prefer to travel to Tongatapu. Further analysis of why this is the case should be undertaken, and appropriate strategies to enhance the uptake of existing services developed.

- 16.** The Australian and New Zealand Governments and MIA should **consider enabling family reunification through a range of visa options** and assess how upfront costs for visa applications can be minimised for PALM scheme participants spouses and family members.
- 17.** MIA and the Australian and New Zealand Governments to prepare **information and materials in Tongan on ways to report online adult harassment and abuse** to the e-Safety Commissioner.
- 18.** The Government of Tonga should consider entering into **reciprocal arrangements with the Australian Government regarding child support payments** (made by the parent without custody to the parent with custody) in cases of family separation or divorce.

19. Stakeholders should commission **further research on the underlying reasons for excessive alcohol consumption among PALM scheme workers.**

20. The Australian and New Zealand Governments should ensure that **workers are provided with accurate and ongoing information on work contracts and visa conditions**. This must be provided in language, and through a culturally responsive and strengths-based approach.

Lower priority

- 21.** OED and MIA's Women and Gender Equality Division should develop a targeted strategy in Tongatapu, Vava'u, Ha'apai and 'Eua to **shift men's attitudes towards women's workforce participation**. These initiatives should involve district and town officers.
- 22.** The Australian Government should **engage local councils to undertake inspections of accommodation** to ensure that it complies with local government regulation.
- 23.** Stakeholders should commission **further research on the outcomes of different recruitment streams** and processes for workers, their families and communities.

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Study sample

Stakeholder group	Sub-groups				
	PALM ST	PALM LT	RSE	Other	Total ⁷²
Family Members					
- Tongatapu	16	2	6	-	24
- Vava'u	5	5	6	-	16
- Ha'apai	3	-	1	-	4
- Eua	11	-	5	-	16
Returned workers in Tonga					
- Tongatapu	19	2	7	-	28
- Vava'u	8	1	25	-	34
- Ha'apai	6	1	10	-	17
- Eua	2	-	3	-	5
Workers in Australia					
- Victoria	17	-	-	-	17
- Western Australia	14	16	-	-	30
- New South Wales	5	-	-	-	5
- Queensland	9	21	-	-	30
Stakeholders					
Town/district officials	-	-	-	33	33
Church leaders	-	-	-	7	7
NGO's	-	-	-	8	8
Government of Tonga representatives	-	-	-	17	17
CLO's in Australia and NZ	-	-	-	4	4
Other				7	7
TOTAL	115	48	63	76	302

⁷² Some participants had been mobilised on more than one scheme (usually PALM short-term and RSE).