

What about women? An overlooked solution to Pacific labour shortages

by Sarah Boxall

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Sosina Moli is now a forklift operator at Tofa Ramsay Shipping
Photo Credit: Supplied

For several years, Pacific businesses have been raising concerns about persistent workforce gaps resulting from the number of workers leaving for overseas work opportunities. In countries like Tonga and Vanuatu, as many as one in five working-age men have left to participate in labour mobility schemes — taking with them valuable skills and experience. However, despite women’s under-representation in the workforce across the region, they remain a largely overlooked solution to pressing workforce needs.

In 2024, the [Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative](#), an Asian Development Bank technical assistance project, conducted a series of consultations with business owners in [Fiji](#) and [Vanuatu](#) to assess the impact of labour mobility on the private sector workforce and to determine if the departure of male workers meant more women were being employed to fill roles.

The consultations found that Pacific businesses have responded to staff losses in many ways. Some are offering higher wages and helping employees assess the financial trade-offs of working abroad. Some, particularly in tourism, are actively welcoming returning workers, recognising the benefits of their overseas experience.

However, while many of the employers consulted said they were open to hiring women, few had actively done so, citing male-dominated workplaces, maternity leave and a shortage of qualified women tradespeople as key barriers. Many also expressed concerns that reflected traditional views of gender roles, such as that their industry or workplace wasn’t suitable for women.

Still, some businesses are showing that employing more women to fill labour market gaps is both possible and productive, even in traditionally male-dominated industries. One such business is Tonga’s Tofa Ramsay Shipping, a third-generation, family-run business providing inter-island passenger and cargo services in Tonga, headed by Tuna Likiliki. When the company began losing key staff — including ship

captains, engineers and heavy machinery operators — to overseas employment opportunities, Tuna knew she had to find a solution that would keep operations running. She quickly realised that many of the women already employed by the company had both the capability and interest to take on roles that had traditionally been held by men.

We were being told to look offshore, pay more to attract people. But the reality is that we had girls and they're here to stay ... We made sure that the training was in place. So now if we needed, we could move things around and just help the business grow. — Tuna Likiliki.

Some family members and male employees initially pushed back against the idea of women working on the ferries, raising concerns about safety and changes in workplace dynamics. Tofa Ramsay responded by making the adjustments needed for women to take on these roles comfortably and safely. This included refurbishing the ships to provide separate, lockable berths and bathroom facilities for women. The company sought government support for these upgrades but, unable to secure funding, invested their own funds in the refurbishments. The company also invested in the necessary training for the women to succeed in their new roles.

The investment and commitment have paid off, as Tofa Ramsay filled critical vacancies and was able to continue to operate two ferries simultaneously. The company now employs women as forklift operators and two women employees currently hold Level 5 captain qualifications.

Encouraging women to undertake skills training and transition into private sector employment presents a viable solution to labour shortages. It would also support existing Pacific government policies and objectives aimed at improving women's employment opportunities and skills development as a key contributor to economic growth. However, women still encounter a range of barriers when it comes to workforce participation that require government and private sector collaboration to address.

One approach is for governments and industry associations to develop targeted incentives for businesses to hire and train women, particularly in sectors facing severe workforce gaps. This could include grants to help businesses modify workplaces — for instance, by creating separate bathroom facilities — to cater to a growing female workforce. Subsidies or tax incentives for employers who upskill or employ women, in addition to expanded support for apprenticeships, can also help women looking to enter into non-traditional roles.

Governments can further support this shift by ensuring women have clearer

pathways to skills and vocational training. This includes working with businesses and training providers to identify critical skills gaps and designing tailored training pathways that address these gaps. Setting and tracking targets for women's participation in vocational education — particularly in trades and other male-dominated sectors — will also help drive progress.

Creating workplaces that are more inclusive and supportive of women is another important step. Businesses can offer flexible work arrangements, such as part-time roles and adjusted hours, and provide access to training and mentoring opportunities to support women's professional development. Businesses can also support women by having clear policies in place on diversity, inclusion and workplace sexual harassment.

Access to affordable, quality childcare remains a major barrier to workforce participation for many women. Governments and businesses can work together to address this by investing in the development of childcare centres — including potentially through public-private partnerships — and offering financial support for employer-provided on-site childcare or subsidised childcare fees.

Finally, strengthening legal protections for women at work is crucial. To create an enabling environment for women workers, governments should review and revise labour laws to eliminate discriminatory provisions, including restrictions on women's employment in certain sectors. Strengthening provisions for women in the workforce, such as maternity and parental leave, equal pay and sexual harassment protections, will also help women enter and remain in the workforce.

Moving women into non-traditional roles helped Tofa Ramsay solve a real business challenge — and with government and business working together, it's a model that could reward other businesses too.

We show them the ladder and give them a chance on those training programs, and that's just smart business. Who is available is who you invest in. It's rewarding to see that we are in a position to give opportunities for women, and we do so. — Tuna Likiliki.

Disclosures:

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