

Mapping UNSW Impact Global Development

Primary SDG	3: GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
Broad theme	Sex work
Research	Examining workplace and sexual health, the economics of sex work, and human rights concerns among sex workers
Impact region	Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Cook Islands
Faculty	Medicine
School/Institute	School of Public Health and Community Medicine
Academic	Professor Heather Worth, Karen McMillan
Project partners	UNDP – grant of \$700,000, UNICEF, Ministries of Health in each country (2016-17)
Related SDGs	10: Reduced Inequalities

Elevator pitch

Heather and Karen have conducted extensive research around the nature of sex work in the Pacific, highlighting health and safety issues and lack of social support, with the aim of prompting governments to act to provide better care for citizens.

The Challenge: Sex work in the Pacific is criminal, making it dangerous for workers

Sex work in Pacific countries is a criminal offence. Most sex work is driven by financial need. Sex work enables women to better provide for family and loved ones. In some countries sex work is undertaken by local women and transgender, while migrants (mostly China and the Philippines) are more prominent in other countries.

Because of the criminal nature of sex work in these countries, workplace health and safety is an issue. Client contact may occur in unsafe places, and the sex worker cannot report violence involving clients, or when clients refuse to pay. They often have poor access to social services, and they are often beaten by locals, police and even family. Migrant sex workers have even less rights because they do not have work visas and cannot access health services, increasing their vulnerability.

UNSW's solution: Examine sex worker motivation, health and access to support

Heather and Karen have been conducting in-field research with sex workers in Pacific countries for the past ten years. Countries include Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Palau and the Cook Islands. Through interviews with these workers, they examine workplace and sexual health, the presence of sexually transmitted diseases (STIs), the economics of sex work, and the workers access to fundamental human rights. Female and transgender workers are asked about their experiences, the meaning the work gives to their lives, and the reasons they stay in the line of the work given its danger and few safeguards. Heather and Karen publish reports on individual countries and they publish regularly in international journals.

The Impact: Increasing public awareness, encouraging governments to act and decriminalise

Heather and Karen's research has encouraged governments, particularly in Fiji, to consider de-criminalising sex work. The research has also courted controversy, with officials in-country denying results but then including them in reports for the UN. In Fiji when the country was experiencing marshal law and the military was illegally detaining and abusing sex workers, Heather and Karen's report resulted in the military immediately stopping this activity.

A paucity of information about sex work in Pacific countries existed prior to Heather and Karen's efforts. Their research has enabled countries to understand the size of sex work populations, sex workers' motivations, sexual health, access to services, and the levels of violence many face. Pacific Island countries and territories have used this information to seek funding support from external organisations for policy change and for programs benefiting workers. These include small NGOs working with sex workers. Ultimately sex workers benefit in the form of greater support and services.

Researcher

Professor Heather Worth is the Academic Lead for the Pacific at UNSW's Institute for Global Development, and Research Advisor for the Pacific Women in Development program, a \$230million DFAT project. She is head of the International HIV Research Group and GlobalHealth@UNSW. She is based in the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at UNSW. A sociologist by trade, Heather has carried out over 20 research and capacity-building projects in the Pacific in the past 15 years. She is a passionate advocate for development in the South Pacific region and is currently spearheading an application to the UNSW Futures scheme for a Pacific Futures Institute.

Ben Falkenmire 14.06.18