



## The Republic of the Marshall Islands

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*(This country profile is available online at [www.unisa.edu.au/genderbudgets](http://www.unisa.edu.au/genderbudgets))*

# 1 Background

Socio-economic indicators	
Population in 2008	0.1 million
Projected population change 2008–50	101%
Percent urban (% of total population) 2008	68 %
GDP per capita (PPP \$US) 2005**	\$1,154
Human Development Index 2005	0.563
Human Development Rank***	Not ranked
Proportion (percent) of population below the Poverty Line (\$1 PPP a day) 2005	20%

Sources: EPPSO (2006) RMI Community Survey: Summary of Survey Results (*PowerPoint* presentation, unpublished); Population Reference Bureau, (2008) *World Population Data Sheet*; \*\*Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2007* United Nations: New York; \*\* \*United Nations Development Programme (1999) *Pacific Human Development Report 1999: Creating Opportunities*. (See Explanatory Notes for details).

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) comprises five coral islands and 29 major atolls, spread across the South Pacific between Hawaii and Papua New Guinea. Nearly three quarters of the nation's population of 0.1 million lives in Majuro (the island capital) and Ebeye (ESCAP 2007:8; Pacific Islands Trade and Investment Commission 2008: 1). The country has an annual population growth rate of 2.2% and over 40% of the population is under the age of 15 (ESCAP 2007: 8). Ebeye has the highest population density of the Pacific Islands of 66,750 persons per square mile (Government of the RMI 2005: 12). The Marshallese are of Micronesian origin with a matrilineal culture characterised by a complex system of clans and lineages tied to land ownership (Economic Policy, Planning and Statistics Office and the RMI United Nations Development Program Office 2005: 12). The official language is Marshallese. English is widely used in business and Japanese spoken by a section of the population.

After WWII the RMI was governed under the US administration which conducted its nuclear testing in the region between 1948 and 1958. Independence was gained in 1983 when the RMI became a self governing democracy but was accompanied by a 15 year Compact of Free Association with the United States, which was re-negotiated for the period 2004- 2023 (Pacific Islands Trade and Investment Commission 2008). The Compact provides economic assistance, defence , immigration privileges (such as the right to live and work in the USA), financial compensation from the US for its nuclear testing and other benefits. In exchange, the US receives the right of 'strategic denial' to other nations by allowing the use of islands (Kwajalein Atoll is a US Military Base with missile testing rights) within the RMI for military purposes (Ahmad and Weiser 2006: 27).

From 1999-2007 the RMI was governed by the United Democratic Party (UDP) but the 2007 election resulted in the election of the Our Islands Party. The new President, a 'commoner' (non-chief) leader, Litokwa Tomeing, took office in January 2008 (ADB 2008; Yokwe Online 2008). The 23 members of Parliament (or Nitigela) is advised by a Council of High Chiefs on matters of traditional custom.

The economic base of the RMI is limited to a few products such as copra and the country is highly dependent on imported fuel, rice and other foodstuffs. Rising import prices has contributed to high inflation rates in recent years with the RMI having an inflation rate of over 20% in 2008, dropping to 9% in 2009 mainly due to the decline in oil prices (ADB 2009: 282). The small private sector makes only a limited contribution to growth and employment creation (ADB 2009: 283).

## 2 The Republic of the Marshall Islands

The country is highly dependent on external assistance provided through the Compact, and by the Asian Development Bank, Taiwan and Japan. During the period of the first Compact (1987-2002), US monies accounted for 70% of the RMI income (Pollock 2004: 7). While the RMI is one of the highest recipients of aid on a per capita basis, its contribution to economic growth and development has been limited. Rapid population growth combined with low levels of economic performance has resulted in many years of low or negative per capita growth (ADB 2006). Per capita income in US\$1,154 (PPP) and poverty in the RMI is widespread, with the ADB (2008a) identifying it as an economy where approximately 20 per cent of the population live on less than \$US1 a day. The World Health Organisation (2009) notes that the RMI does not have extreme poverty and average life expectancy is 67 years, but there is evidence that poverty and hardship are increasing. Social and health problems such as crime, domestic violence, unemployment, malnourishment, and substance abuse are further consequences of long term economic stagnation (Ahmad and Weiser 2006: 28).

The Asian Development Bank has described the RMI's progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals in 2003 as 'slow' which the government confirmed in its 2005 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) progress report. This report concludes that the RMI is falling short both of its own national goals and targets and the MDGs in the quality of education, reduction of communicable diseases, equitable access to sanitation and clean water, quality of healthcare, employment opportunities and development gaps between the urban and rural areas. On the other hand, there continues to be improvements in reducing infant and maternal mortality rates (Government of the RMI 2005). The small non-government sector is credited by the government as being an important provider of services with 'social services focusing on youth, women and outer-island, rural community development are now largely addressed by the NGO sector'. The report acknowledges that the government needs to strengthen its collaborative efforts with civil society (Government of the RMI 2005:14).

A further important challenge faced by Marshallese citizens is climate change. The 2007/2008 UNDP *Human Development Report* warned that sea level rises will see a number of Pacific islands disappear, resulting in Pacific people facing the greatest risk of becoming poorer, being displaced from their homes and regressing in their development as a result (reported in Yokwe Online 2007). On a more positive note, Countrywatch (2008) claims the country has one of the best human rights records internationally.

## 2 Gender equality

As Marshallese society is traditionally matrilineal, women in the RMI continue to wield considerable influence in family and cultural affairs, with women chiefs and traditional landowners holding considerable sway on how clan lands are utilised, and how family affairs are conducted (Government of the RMI 2005: 29). However, while the traditional culture provides women with rights to customary land title and inheritance passes through the female lines, access to credit or to registration rights are not guaranteed. In addition, the migration of many Marshallese to the urban population centers of Majuro and Ebeye, and the consequent increased exposure to non-Marshallese values and culture, have helped weaken the traditional cultural norms and organisation that have been central to the society (Dugue 2003).

Progress in gender equality has been evident in some spheres although limited. Graham and Paul (2002) argue that women have significantly improved their economic status relative to men over the past thirty five years. The Asian Development Bank (2008b) reports that the gross secondary enrolment ratio for girls (ie as a % of the female secondary school age population) is 78% with female to male ratios at 1.05.

Gender equality indicators	
Gender Development Index (GDI) Value 2005	Not ranked.
Gender Development Index (GDI) Rank 2005	Not ranked.
Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) Value 2007/2008	Not ranked.
Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) Rank 2007/2008	Not ranked.
Gender Gap Index (GGI) Value 2007	Not ranked.
Gender Gap Index (GGI) Rank 2007	Not ranked.
Seats in parliament held by women (% of total) 2007*	3%
Population Sex Ratio (males per 100 females) 2005	94.76
Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 100,000 live births) 2005**	73.8
Adult literacy rate, female (aged 15 and older) 2005	Not available
Adult literacy rate, male (aged 15 and older) 2005	Not available
Gross secondary enrolment: Ratio of female rate to male rate 2005*	1.05
Gross secondary enrolment: Female ratio (% of the female secondary school age population) 2005	78%
Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector (% of total employment in the sector) 2005	33.2%
Ratification to CEDAW (year)	2006

Sources: \* UNDP (2007) *Human Development Report 2007/08. Country Profiles: Marshall Islands*; \*\*ADB (2008c) *Strategy and Program Assessment, Gender Profiles of Asian Development Bank's Pacific Developing Member Countries*; UN Statistics Division (2008) *Millennium Development Goal Indicators*. (See Explanatory Notes).

The World Health Organisation (2009) reports that the RMI is essentially on target to meet the Millennium Development Goals with regards to gender equality in education as primary and secondary enrolment rates indicate female to male enrolment ratios of 50:50.

The qualification is that at both these levels, female drop-out rates are higher than males and secondary completion data indicates that 46% of boys graduate compared to 36% of girls (ADB 2008b). At a political level, the RMI ratified CEDAW in 2006, signalling a more formal commitment to gender equality by the RMI government. Furthermore, Women United Together (WUTMI) in the Marshall Islands, established in 1987 as the key umbrella group representing grassroots women's NGOs throughout the country, has proven increasingly important in promoting gender equality after several years of being defunded by the government (Sharp and Vas Dev 2006). Indeed, the ADB (2008b: 40) has argued that NGO activity on gender through WUTMI 'has more profile than government's work' and 'is delivering programs that should be carried by government.'

Beyond these positive indicators however, serious problems remain and continue to grow. With regard to women's participation in the national parliament, the RMI has one of the lowest rates internationally with only one women elected into parliament in 5 elections and in 1995 no women were elected (UNDP 2005). In the formal sector, the ADB (2008b) has highlighted that labour force participation (1999) was 35.4% for women and 66.3% for men and the 2006 Household Income and Expenditure Survey showed that women's earnings were approximately only 70% of men's. The country's slow progress in economic development has seen few resources provided for promoting the economic and social position of women and girls. In particular, limited services have emerged to deal with the significant problems of domestic violence and teenage pregnancy (Sharp and Vas Dev 2006). The U.S Department of State (2006) has identified violence against women as a serious human rights issue in the RMI. Similarly, the incidence of teenage pregnancy in the RMI continues to be the highest among the Pacific Island countries.

An impediment to gender equality has been the lack of women’s policy machinery in government. In 1979 the RMI government established the Women’s Desk (since renamed the Women in Development Division) within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but failed to adequately resource it. The RMI women’s policy expired in 2001, signalling a lack of policy direction and commitment to allocating resources for gender equality (Sharp and Vas Dev 2004). This has been confirmed in separate studies by both UNIFEM Pacific and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) which have concluded that the government of RMI does not view gender equality as a priority (cited in ADB 2007). It has also been noted that there is a lack of donor support around gender equality in the RMI. The Asian Development Bank (2008) reported that the Women in Development Division has been further downgraded over recent years. Inadequate funding and low technical capacity for gender advocacy and analysis has meant that it relies largely on NGOs to implement a large portion of its mandate.

### 3 Budgetary context

Budgetary indicators	
Central Government tax revenue (% of GDP) 2003	Not available
Central Government total expenditure (% of GDP) 2003	Not available
General Government public expenditure on education (% of GDP) 2002–05	11.8%
General Government public expenditure on education (% of total expenditure) 2002-05	15.8%
General Government public expenditure on health (% of GDP) 2004	14.7%
General Government public expenditure on health (% of total government expenditure) 2005	15.2%
Central Government military expenditure (% of GDP) 2005	Not available
Central Government public expenditure on defence (% of total outlays) 2007	Not available
General Government total debt service (% of GDP) 2008	60%
Open Budget Index: Overall Score	Not available

Sources: ADB (2009) *Asian Development Outlook 2009*; \*UNDP (2007) *Human Development Report 2007/08 Country Profile: Marshall Islands*; World Bank Group (2009) *World Development Indicators Database*; Open Budget Initiative (2008) *Open Budget Index 2008*.

The main factor influencing the country’s economic context and colouring ‘nearly every story on the Marshall Islands’ is the Compact of Free Association with the United States (Johnson 2004: 127). Transparency International reports that a central problem with the first Compact (1987-2002) was that there was no requirement of accountability. As a result, corruption was widespread, the funding did not produce economic growth and the country was threatened with financial collapse (Pollock 2004).

The 2004-2023 Compact agreement comes with strict rules for governance which will be a challenge for the delicate balance between the traditional and the modern system that characterises the RMI (Pollock 2004: 8). Consultations during a pilot participatory budget exercise in 2005 identified the Marshallese society emphasis on group consensus and community in potential conflict with recent western governance models which stress public questioning and criticism of government (Ahmad and Weiser 2006: 28). A key goal of the Compact is to ensure a sustainable source of revenue to replace grant assistance in 2024 (Pacific Islands Trade and Investment Commission 2008). However, at this stage, the RMI budget remains heavily dependent on US grants, accounting for 64% of revenue and grants in 2007-2009 (ADB 2008; ADB 2009: 287).

The RMI government argues that the renegotiated Compact with its technical assistance and other resources will assist the country to meet its MDG and development goals with funding focused on the priority areas of health, education and the environment. The other factor the government highlights that is critical in meeting its development goals is the transition to a performance-based budgeting system. The aim of this budgetary reform is to improve the allocation of available financial resources by specifying the inputs and outputs of government agencies required to implement the national development goals and policies of the *Vision 2018 Strategic Development Plan Framework* and the MDGs (Government of the RMI 2005: 11).

A pilot performance-based budgeting approach was a component of a donor-funded package of reforms that began in 1998 focussing on the institutional strengthening of the Ministry of Finance (Sharp and Vas Dev 2006). Despite such reforms, the ADB reported in 2008 (2008b) that government spending is not aligned with poverty strategies, thereby increasing the risk for vulnerable groups such as youth, school dropouts and the elderly. Also government spending on social services showed limited allocations to primary health care and primary education, both of which would have a more immediate and sustainable impact on poverty reduction.

In July 2008 the RMI government declared a 'state of economic emergency' in response to rising inflation and the demand for imported oil. A number of cost-cutting measures were introduced and donor countries and regional lending agencies were approached for financial support (ADB 2008: 142). Economic growth forecasts have been revised downwards for 2009 and 2010 with GDP growing at less than 1% (ADB 2009b: 116). In addition, the global financial crisis has cut the value of the Compact Trust Fund which will put further pressures on the RMI budget in the future in order to rebuild the Fund (ADB 2009: 282).

#### **4 Gender-responsive budgeting**

A gender-responsive budgeting pilot project coordinated by the Ministry of Finance was implemented in the RMI in 2002/2003. This pilot was part of an Asian Development Bank Regional Technical Assistance program 'Youth and Gender Sensitive Public Expenditure Management in the Pacific' (the youth sensitive budgeting pilot component was undertaken in Samoa).

The Asian Development Bank justified the choice of the RMI for assisting a gender budget pilot in the Pacific as 'coordinating with the ADB's ongoing assistance in finance, planning and economic reform, particularly in the development of sound public management systems' (ADB 2001 Appendix A). Sharp and Vas Dev (2007) argue that this framework also provided an opportunity to enhance one of the principles of public expenditure management, namely for greater civil society participation in the policy and budgetary processes (Sharp and Vas Dev 2006: 85). The agreement was that technical assistance would be provided by the ADB for one year, it would involve several ministries and include NGOs (Sharp and Vas Dev 2006).

The gender budget pilot focussed on a single issue - teenage pregnancy - around which it sought to develop a gender budget analysis and a process for changing resource allocations (Sharp 2004). Several training workshops were held with the pilot ministries and NGOs focussing on the tools of analysis and strategies for engaging with the budget decision making processes. A coordinating committee, led by the a senior member of the Ministry of Finance, and comprising the Director of the Women's Desk, a senior member of the umbrella women's NGO groups, Women United in the Marshall Island, and a Ministry of Finance official, participated in a mentoring program in Australia and were responsible for developing a strategy for involving the ministries and NGOs in a gender responsive budget exercise around teen pregnancy (Sharp, Vas Dev and Spoehr 2003).

Many factors were identified that could undermine the success of the pilot and ongoing efforts to make the budget more responsive to gender issues. The lack of a well resourced women's machinery of government, poor budgetary institutions and continued financial crises experienced by the RMI were identified as barriers. The Public Expenditure Management system and planning frameworks in particular posed problems such as a lack of available budget documentation, the use of traditional line budgeting which lacked information on the programs and services provided, the use of 'special accounts' which resulted in a failure to provide details of a large proportion of agency funds in the budget and poorly understood planning and budgeting process in government and civil society (Sharp, Vas Dev and Spoehr 2003: 44).

But, in contrast to other pilots in the Pacific (notably Fiji and Samoa) that focussed on the bureaucracy, the RMI gender responsive budget pilot was successful in involving civil society and building capacity, in particular through the newly re-funded and active umbrella group, Women United in the Marshall Islands (WUTMI). This was an important means of promoting accountability for gender issues (Sharp 2004). The RMI pilot gender budget initiative did make progress towards changing resource allocations as a result of the gender budget analysis of teenage pregnancy and a coalition of government agencies and NGO representatives interested in bringing about change. A cross-ministry budget proposal was discussed with the Chief Secretary's Office in the lead-up to the budget. This proposal, however, did not progress from the draft stage as the normal budgetary processes involving ministries collapsed under the uncertainty of the delayed USA Compact and RMI financial negotiations. However, the process of each ministry mapping their budgets for programs that impacted on teenage pregnancy led to one ministry reallocating donor funding to support the health education of adolescents in ways that included teenage pregnancy issues (Sharp and Vas Dev 2006: 96). Despite such progress the gender budget initiative did not extend beyond the pilot phase.

However, there have been some subsequent activities supportive of further gender budget work in the RMI. The Asia Foundation, with funding from the Asian Development Bank, conducted a technical assistance pilot project on institutionalising civil society participation to create local pro-poor budgets in 2006. This project touched on gender budgeting (Asia Foundation 2005), and like the 2002/03 pilot project, provided capacity building to Women United in the Marshall Islands (WUTMI). As part of the exercise the country's first budget training manual was produced with a summary version in Marshallese, aimed at civil society, trainers and stakeholders (Ahmad and Weiser 2006: 31). It identified GRB as an innovative example of applied budgeting (Asia Foundation and ADB 2006). The Economic Policy Planning and Statistics Office of the RMI has maintained that, while GRB has not been directly progressed, the transition to performance budgeting has put an emphasis on producing gender disaggregated data. Furthermore, there is more awareness about budgeting generally, particularly amongst NGOs (email correspondence with a senior government official 20/02/09).

As a Pacific country, the RMI participates in the Triennial Conferences on Pacific Women and the Pacific Ministerial Meetings on Women that follow the conference. These conferences are organised by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and a *Revised Pacific Platform of Action on the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality 2005-2015* was agreed to at the 2004 and 2007 conferences. This far-reaching Pacific Platform includes gender responsive budgeting as one of the strategies to economically empower women (Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2005: 42). This position was reinforced with qualifications in the formal Statement released at the 2008 UN Commission of the Status of Women Meeting by the regional group, the Pacific Islands Forum:

*Our experience with gender responsive budgeting projects in the Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa and Fiji encountered such challenges. It demonstrated the need for strong and sustained political commitment as well as active participation of civil society. Once there is local ownership*

at strategic levels then we can implement and realise the benefits of the gender budgeting approach. (Statement on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum Group 27/2/2008)

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## Links to electronic resources for the RMI

Economy and Investing in the RMI

<http://www.rmiembassyus.org/Economy.htm>

Economic Policy Planning and Statistics Office

<http://www.spc.int/prism/country/mh/stats/Index.htm>

ADB, <http://www.adb.org/MarshallIslands>

World Bank

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/PACIFICISLANDSEXTN/0,,menuPK:441893~pagePK:141159~piPK:141110~theSitePK:441883,00.html>

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