

## **'On the ship, you can do anything': the impact of international cruiseship employment for i-Kiribati women**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Kiribati is a remote, small island country with a long history of male temporary migration as a mechanism for relieving unemployment and facilitating remittances. This article looks at a unique case study of female i-Kiribati migration and is based on interviews with a small sample of i-Kiribati women who worked on international cruiseships between 2009-2012, thus providing interesting insight into first-time migration experiences of women from a remote island country. The findings suggest that while the experience did not generally lead to observable changes in their ability to manage remittances, nor in gender relations between husband and wife, employment on the ship did nonetheless have strong reported benefits in terms of independence, skills development and confidence of the women interviewed. These findings corroborate existing literature showing while entrenched gender norms rarely shift directly due to women's migration experiences, migration does contribute to the women's empowerment through increased agency and ability to make decisions, both during and after their migration.*

**Key words:** *temporary migration, Pacific, Kiribati, gender, women's empowerment, cruiseship employment*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a unique set of circumstances, around 120 i-Kiribati women with almost no migration experience were employed on international cruiseships during the period of 2004 to 2012 under an agreement between the Government of Kiribati and the Norwegian Cruise Liner (NCL) company. After 2012 the agreement was abruptly brought to a halt with no further contracts issued to i-Kiribati women, there was a lingering perception amongst government and private recruitment stakeholders that this ‘experiment’ in opening maritime migration opportunities to women was unsuccessful because of the proportion of the women who fell pregnant on the ship, and the lack of long-term economic impact as a result of the migration. This chapter in women’s migration in Kiribati also feeds into a broader debate on whether female migrants working in low-skilled occupations benefit from migration and whether they are ‘empowered’ by their experience, which is relevant to future policymaking around whether governments should facilitate female migration, including in the cruiseship industry.

Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 20 female migrants from NCL, and 12 other interviews with key stakeholders (including government officials) in Tarawa, the research looks at the degree to which women were ‘empowered’, as a result of their cruiseship employment. To assess whether there was a degree of empowerment, the research considers three variables: (1) the extent to which women had control over their earnings (proxied by remittance decisions) relative to their control over their earnings before cruiseship employment; (2) whether the women felt that their position within their family was strengthened as a result of their migration (in terms of power dynamics with parents and husbands); and (3) whether their experience impacted on their subjective sense of confidence and independence, and to what extent this influenced future plans and ambitions.

The article begins by providing a review of the literature linking women’s migration and gender empowerment before outlining unique aspects of the international cruiseship industry. The article then turns to the specific socio-economic context of Kiribati and the situation of women’s migration before presenting the evidence from the field research. The final section returns to the research questions and places the experience of the interviewees in the broader literature.

## **WOMEN’S MIGRATION AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT**

The growing research looking at the nexus between women’s autonomous migration and women’s empowerment has generated a spectrum of scholarly opinions on whether migration is a liberating, a benign or an exploitative experience for women, and whether it is correlated in any way with a changing of social norms in the societies from which the migrant women come. While some have argued that migration can be a liberating experience for women, resulting in greater personal autonomy and independence, as well as increased power in the household (Sassen, 2006; Ghosh, 2009; Lopez-Ekra, Aghazarm, Kotter & Mollard, 2011), others have posited that women’s inequality in sending countries is merely replicated in destination countries, with little tangible impact on empowerment as a result of migration (Ramirez, Garcia Dominguez & Morais, 2004; Parreñas, 2001).

Gender empowerment is of course a broad concept, which at its core may be conceptualized as a process involving ‘conscientization, agency, ownership of and control over resources, ability to make choice and to participate in decisions that affect one’s life’ (Charmes & Wieringa, 2003). This definition sees empowerment as a context-specific phenomenon which is highly dependent on women’s status in the sending country – thus, it could be argued that even where female migrants’ socio-economic situation in a destination country may be far from perfect, migration may still provide for more agency and independence than was at women’s disposal prior to migration. Other, particularly feminist scholars, have hastened to add that what appears as agency in migration may in fact be highly constrained and embedded in kin obligations (Williams, 2004). Combined with the exploitative nature of domestic work, which most low-skilled female migrants are involved in, genuine empowerment may be illusory (Parreñas, 2001).

Here it is important to make a distinction between immediate/short-term outcomes for the migrant women, and the longer-term broader impact on gender relations whether within households, a community or a country from which the women come. Without discounting the very real exploitation that is experienced by some female migrants particularly in domestic work, empirical evidence, on balance, suggests that ‘immigrant women achieve some limited, albeit uneven, benefits from migration and settlement’ (Levitt, 2001). These benefits might include quantitative outcomes (such as changes in women’s income); observable changes (such as job status, social inclusion, household bargaining power) and qualitative assessments of women’s own situations (such as understanding of notions of rights and entitlements) (Piper & French, 2011). In particular, empirical literature has suggested that women’s migration can impact on household decision-making, including women’s ability to determine how their remittances are used (Morrison & Schiff, 2010). There is some evidence of changing gender dynamic in relation to domestic duties, such as men’s participation in domestic work (Levitt, 2011); and women’s increased independence and autonomy as a result of the skills, knowledge and network they acquire through migration (De Oliveria Assis, 2014).

It is important to note, of course, that many of these empirical studies are context specific and dependent on a myriad of factors including social, cultural factors, including education and religion (Lopez-Ekra et al, 2011). Also important are specific factors around how women live and work in the destination country, for example, if they live independently from a family group, and whether they worked in the formal sector (Hugo, 2000). For example, women who previously had social capital in the household may find it ebbing away through migration – such as where women who make decisions on how household income is spent may find that being away from the household through migration can weaken their continuing ability to maintain this status due to physical absence from home (Guzman, Morrison & Sjoblom, 2008). On balance, however, where women increase their income as a result of migration, they commonly do experience an elevation in their status in the household, and increased bargaining power (Lopez-Ekra et al, 2011).

When looking at indicators of long-term change – and particularly the diffusion effects on gender relations at community level – the empirical case for empowerment is more ambivalent. On the one hand, living and working in a country with more progressive gender rights can encourage

women to 'start questioning the assumption that gender inequality is 'naturalized' and to bring back these ideas when they return to their communities (Bastia & Busse, 2011). However, the degree to which these views are actually adopted by others in the community is often limited. Even where gender roles in the migrant women's own households shift during the period of migration (for example, husband and wife will share equally the domestic duties), upon return to the sending country, this may be 'undone' – with social roles shifting back to what they were before migration –by the entrenched views on stereotyped gender roles (Ghosh, 2009; Levitt, 2001). Levitt argues that overall there is 'little evidence that migration profoundly changes gender ideologies or that power within households is radically redistributed' (Levitt 2001). This may, in part, be due to the fact that traditional gender norms are often entrenched in the very process of women's migration. For example, argues Parreñas, women's migration is commonly in limited to occupations such as domestic work and caregiving, which reinforces the predominant view in many sending communities that domestic work is a 'woman's responsibility'. So, instead of a woman's absence leading to her husband taking on domestic duties, the duties pass through to other women in the family (aunts, mothers and female siblings) (Parreñas, 2001).

## **GENDER AND INTERNATIONAL SEAFARING**

The discourse of women's migration is often focused on low-skilled women and typically in domestic work – an industry which employs the majority of autonomous female migrants from Asia (see for example Yamanaka & Piper, 2005). Unlike Asia, there has not been large scale migration in domestic work from the Pacific, with most female migration associated with more skilled occupations such as nursing and teaching (Voigt-Graf, 2007; Khoo & Voigt-Graf, 2011; Rokoduru, 2004). Little empirical research has however looked at lower skilled female migration from the Pacific.

One sector where some female migration is known to occur is the tourism sector, which is a mainstay of many Pacific Island economies.

A number of large cruiseship companies pass through the Pacific region, and while there have been relatively few Pacific Island workers aboard these ships, with the exception of a small number of i-Kiribati, ni-Vanuatu and Fijians (P&O, 2011), governments in the Pacific are increasingly looking at this industry as a form of employment for their workers (Garae, 2015).

Sometimes referred to as 'migrant workers of the oceans' (Chin 2008), workers aboard cruiseships and shipping vessels are, in a number of ways, different to other migrant workers. First, for these workers there is no 'destination country' as employees of shipping and cruiseship companies are travelling between numerous countries, and are therefore also generally not subject to national immigration regulations, nor employment provisions (Terry, 2011). This results in a unique form of transnationalism, described by Borovnik as based on a common identity and a building of social networks through temporary and multi-national work-based communities on board ship (Borovnik, 2004). The second unique aspect is the diverse number of nationalities working side by side onboard with dozens of nationalities aboard, largely as a result of the de-regulated nature of the sector because of open registries (Chin, 2008).

The cruise ship industry employs hundreds of thousands of workers globally – more than 70,000 come from the Philippines alone (Terry, 2014). Women are largely concentrated in the low-skill end of the hotel division of ships, though this is often correlated with ethnicity – with most of the female employees from West Europe and North America employed in white collar hotel jobs while the majority of women from Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia in much more low-paid blue collar jobs such as cleaning, housekeeping and bartending (Wu, 2005).

Few studies on employment in the cruiseship sector have taken a sex-disaggregated approach, looking specifically at the experiences of women (Terry, 2014). The only exceptions are a small number of studies looking at sexual health amongst female workers appear to have considered the social situation of female workers on cruiseships (Thomas, Bloor & Little, 2013).

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Migration has been an enduring aspect of Kiribati history. As one of the most remote countries in the Pacific Island region, with prevailing issues of poverty, and lack of access to employment opportunities, it has long been seen as a country which is integrally dependent on migration (through remittances) and aid.<sup>1</sup>

In 2010, the unemployment rate was 31% of the labour force but higher amongst females (34.1%) (Kiribati National Statistics Organization (KNSO), 2012). Youth unemployment was particularly high, with 54% of the 15-24 year old persons being unemployed (KNSO 2012) with at least half of the school leavers left without training opportunities or jobs. Because Kiribati does not have a free mobility agreement with other countries, permanent migration is not an available option, except for the highly skilled (who can migrate under skilled migration programs), those with family reunification opportunities, or successful candidates in the Pacific Access Category, which permits up to 75 i-Kiribati per year to settle permanently in New Zealand.

Temporary migration has been a long-standing employment opportunity for a significant proportion of i-Kiribati, almost all of whom have been men. Although mining and export of phosphate in Nauru provided significant migration opportunities (as well as national employment opportunities on Banaba Island), these largely disappeared by 2004-05. Another long-standing migration opportunity has been for male seafarers working aboard cargo ships. I-Kiribati workers are recruited through the South Pacific Marine Services – a recruiter representing a consortium of six German shipping vessels. As of December 2013, there were about 1,008 Kiribati seamen on board, which while lower than in previous years, is still a sizeable proportion of the working age male population (SPMS, 2014; Borovnik, 2006). Another key sector of migration is the fisheries sector with approximately 500 I-Kiribati crew are working on international vessels (KNSO, 2012).

Another, more recent form of temporary migration, is migration to New Zealand and (and later) Australia, through seasonal and guestwork programs. In 1977, a Fiji Rural Work Permit Scheme was amended to include workers from Tuvalu and Kiribati (renamed the South Pacific Work Permit Scheme South Pacific) and later, a visa-waiver scheme operated from 1986 – 2002 which included i-Kiribati migrants. More recently, seasonal worker programs in agriculture

have admitted i-Kiribati workers both to New Zealand (since 2007) and Australia (since 2008). However, Kiribati faces competition from larger Pacific Island countries with better resourced labour administrations, and cheaper air linkages to Australia and New Zealand. It has therefore not been easy to find New Zealand or Australian employers for seasonal workers from Kiribati and the number of workers remains small.

#### ***I-KIRIBATI WOMEN, EMPLOYMENT AND MIGRATION***

While there is largely gender parity in terms of educational attainment in Kiribati, there are clear difference in labour market participation. According to the latest census (2010), women do have access to jobs in the public service, however the proportion of women in private sector work is much lower than men's, and a much higher proportion of women than men was not in the labour force (KNSO, 2012).

Wages in Kiribati are low, and many of the more lucrative jobs are in international employment such as seafaring, to which women have had limited opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Other than the more recent experience of women working in seasonal work, there had been only two key periods of female migration, which are discussed below.

There is no record of migration in a female-dominant sector having been explored as a labour strategy until 1997, when the then-President Teburoro Tito (interview 21) initiated discussions within government on possible opportunities for i-Kiribati women as domestic workers and carers for the elderly in Hong Kong. It is unclear whether negotiations had formerly commenced when leaders of major churches in Kiribati showed strong opposition to the talks, lobbying MPs that this kind of migration of i-Kiribati would lead to prostitution and exploitation. The discussions were abandoned, however migration of 'domestic helpers and caretakers' was included in a Memorandum of Understanding between the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the Kiribati Governments regarding Labour Cooperation in 2006 (alongside manufacturing, construction, merchant shipping and fishing). There was no record of the agreement ever having been implemented in any way (interview 31).

In 2004, in response to interest from the SPMS in employing women stewards, around 26 women were trained in catering and stewarding at the MTC, took up employment on shipping vessels (Quinn, 2014). Over a period of three years, women were placed in pairs on various merchant ships. As a consequence of a number of issues including a high level of pregnancy, numerous complaints of sexual and other harassment by i-Kiribati seafarers, the suicide of an i-Kiribati female steward and a murder of a German man by an i-Kiribati man, allegedly due to a dispute over an i-Kiribati seafarer, SPMS stopped recruiting women in 2007 and has not resumed since (Quinn, 2014).

The recruitment of women on Norwegian Cruise Liner (NCL) ships came about as a result of an agreement between the Kiribati Government and NCL regarding the latter's use of Kiribati territory (Fanning Island) along the ship's route pursuant to which, NCL agreed to recruit women in a number of low-skilled roles including housekeeping and reception. The agreement was terminated in 2012, and NCL stopped the recruitment of i-Kiribati workers.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study is based on field research carried out in South Tarawa in June 2015. The research involved semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 of the women who worked on NCL, and who lived in South Tarawa, as well as twelve key stakeholder interviews.

The NCL workers were identified through a snowball technique with initial contact made through hotels that employed some of the NCL women, and then asking for further potential interviewees' contacts.<sup>3</sup> An informal organization of NCL women living in South Tarawa had been formed in 2012, so many of the women interviewed knew the details of other women on island whom they knew from the organization. This was judged to be the best methodology for reaching the NCL workers, as there were no reliable records of workers on NCL.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to recognize that this method has limitations, most importantly that women from outer islands were not included. Second, the women in the sample, who were likely to belong to the informal group may have shared particular characteristics such as age or time spent on the ship. The research tried to address this sampling bias by ensuring that the sample included women in different age ranges, marital situations and number of contracts on the ship.

Interviews were conducted in a private setting either in the woman's home, or workplace. Interviews lasted around 45 minutes to one hour and focussed on the women's social and financial situation before, during and after the NCL experience – particularly focussing on family relationships, control of finances.

Interviews conducted with key stakeholders including the head of SAOK (private recruitment agency which recruited the women); the head of the MTC; a representative of the Ministry of Labour and Human Resource Development; the Taiwanese ambassador and other stakeholders.

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### *RECRUITMENT*

The recruitment of the women was managed domestically by a private recruitment company (SAOK), with collaboration from the NCL head office in the United States. The call for recruitment was done by radio, which invited men and women over the age of 18, with English language ability and completion of Form 6 education to apply. Those shortlisted after the initial application were required to sit a written test. The women shortlisted after the test results were invited for an interview, which was conducted by a human resource manager from NCL headquarters.

Although there are no statistics on the characteristics of the women chosen, as a group, of the women interviewed for this research the majority were, at the time of recruitment, mainly in their early to mid-twenties, and largely single.



**Table 1:** Age and marital status at time of recruitment

<b>Age when commenced at NCL</b>	<b>Single</b>	<b>Married/widowed</b>	<b>Total</b>
20-24	9	1	10
25-29	4	2	6
30-34	0	4	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>20</b>

Most had been working for a number of years before recruitment, in a variety of low-skilled roles in Tarawa. With the exception of two interviewees, none had lived abroad.

All of the women interviewed, along with others engaged on NCL had no specific training on ships, with the exception of a one month course which was carried out at the MTC, and largely focused on safety on board ships.

#### *LIFE BEFORE NCL*

The majority of the single women interviewed commented on the strict i-Kiribati cultural norms that they were obliged to follow by their families. A typical response, given by one interviewee was that:

*'I was not allowed to go out at night or socialize with others too much, except for church activities. My curfew was 10pm and I was not allowed to drink alcohol.'* (interview 1).

Those interviewees who were already married also often had to obey rules about going out, set by their husbands. One woman said that her husband didn't want her to go out during the day and she was only allowed to go out at night if they went out together. However her husband would regularly go out drinking and would sometimes not come back for up to three days (interview 9).

Whilst most of the interviewees were employed prior to working, few had much control over their savings. If they were single, typically their salary would be given to either the father or sometimes the mother (particularly common if the father had problems with alcohol consumption).

Where the interviewees were already married, income was either shared between the husband and wife, or managed only by the husband.



### *DURATION AND NATURE OF WORK ON THE SHIPS*

The majority of women had contracts of around 10 months (a small number had shorter contracts of around four months). Between 10 month contracts they would be given two months of vacation time in Tarawa. Most of the women interviewed worked in housekeeping with a small number in hotel reception – sectors which both employed mostly women.

Although the interviewees were not probed about their rights at work, most said that they had good working conditions, regular time off and were happy with their wages. Several interviewees commented on a sexual harassment policy which set rules for conduct for men and women and which was regularly enforced. Relations with other nationalities on the ship were generally cordial and often friendly, though one interviewee commented that there was some discrimination against i-Kiribati workers by other crew members from South Asia, on the basis that the i-Kiribati were uneducated and untrained.

While it is far from clear that the conditions were exemplary, the working conditions were reported to be far better than those of women who were employed by SPMS on cargo ships between 2004-07. One of the women interviewed had previously been employed for two years on a merchant ship as a stewardess. Her biggest fear was the i-Kiribati seafarers on board, who would sometimes get drunk and pester the women to join in the drinking. She recalled an incident when one of the i-Kiribati men came towards her with a knife and told her that if she didn't join them they would 'do something bad'. When she reported the incident to the captain the entire i-Kiribati crew were dismissed, though she herself was also required to leave soonafter.

On NCL, there were also procedures in place to report incidents, and the women reported that they felt that they could discuss problems with other women. The interviewees noted that they formed close kinships with other women from many nationalities, some of which they would meet across several contracts.

### *SOCIAL EXPERIENCES ON THE SHIP*

The majority of unprompted responses to life on the NCL ships relative to life in Tarawa was that it was 'like another world' where you had the freedom to 'do anything that you want'. The majority of women commented on the fact that there was no one 'bossing them' which they found liberating. 'In Kiribati, there are many places you cannot go and things you cannot do because your family will become angry or feel ashamed'. However on the ship, it was not only the fact of others not dictating their behaviour, but also the fact that on the ship there was a feeling of privacy – that the women could do what they wanted without the rest of the family or community knowing.

This was generally seen as a liberating aspect of life on the ship by many of the interviewed women. However two of the women also commented that freedom could be difficult to manage. In particular, not having someone 'who tells you what to do and not to do.. can be dangerous because you do not know how to protect yourself. At home, your parents will.. stop you from doing silly things' (interview 17).

When elaborating on what ‘freedom’ on the ship meant, many of the women commented on the ability to drink alcohol, which often became routine after completing a shift, either at the staff bar or in their individual rooms. The women interviewed generally noted that consumption was limited to one or two alcoholic beverages, and that they enjoyed the ability to socialize with other crew in an inclusive, relaxed setting; although some felt that it also led to problems of binge-drinking, and this sometimes led to unsafe sexual conduct.

Many of the women commented that being on the ship, for the first time, brought them into contact with men who were not their relatives – particularly male crew members who largely came from the Caribbean, and parts of Asia. Several commented on the difference between the way that they were treated by men on the ship, relative to conduct in Kiribati. For example, men were outwardly courteous and cautious in terms of their public conduct around the women. One interviewee commented that while in Kiribati it might be ok to touch a woman’s bottom, or slap her, this was entirely unacceptable on the ship. Both friendships between men and women, and romantic liaisons, quickly formed between some of the women and male crew members.

While on the ship, many of the single women fell pregnant to another member of the crew (12 out of 20 interviewed). Some of these were planned pregnancies as a result of relationships formed on the ship, though several were unplanned and resulted from unprotected sexual intercourse.<sup>5</sup> Knowledge of family planning and contraceptives was mixed among the women. Several commented on the fact that the pre-departure training in South Tarawa allocated just one day to sexual health and that the content covered only sexual transmitted diseases and did not specifically deal with pregnancy. Others were aware of the risk of pregnancy but assumed that this risk was low, either because they thought that pregnancy was unlikely after one or a few episodes of sexual intercourse, or if during previous periods of sexual activity they had not gotten pregnant.

Women who became pregnant on ship were often concerned about how to discuss the news with their parents and scared to return home. One woman ‘hid’ from her father at a friend’s house when she returned because she was afraid of his reaction. However for most of the women, the anger and disappointment that the family’s initially expressed after hearing about a pregnancy was resolved while the women were still on the ship through phone conversations with family. It was rarely possible to keep the pregnancy a secret from the family, even while on the ship, as news quickly travelled either through i-Kiribati colleagues who returned from the ship earlier, or through friends.

#### *REMITTANCES AND DEALING WITH MONEY*

Depending on the contract and position they had, women earned between AU\$600 – 800 a month (US\$430-580), which was up to eight times the average salary for the women prior to leaving.

Unlike seafarers, the women on NCL were not provided with information on an allotment system which would enable them to remit a specific amount every month and they were not provided with guidance on how much to remit, nor on investment options to ensure long-term benefit of their savings. Most women sent around half of their money to their family and saved the rest in cash, which they brought back in a lump sum at the end of each contract, after spending a small

amount of money on their own purchases.

In sending remittances, single women generally sent money to their mothers, who managed household income. Those that had children would generally send money to whomever was looking after the children – often their husbands' family, such as the mother or sister-in-law. However, rarely did the women have control over the specific details of how their earnings were spent. Conversations about remittances were generally limited to confirmation over the telephone of whether the money was received via the transfer. A few of the women stated that it would have been inappropriate ('mistrustful') to ask how the remittances had been spent. However, women with school-aged siblings knew that the bulk of remittances went to payment of school fees. This is consistent with research on seafarer remittances which shows that school fees form a significant part of remittance spending (Borovnik, 2004). Other common expenses were house construction (such as tiling, house extensions) and household purchases such as a washing machine or TV. Some of the women, however, had no idea how the money had been spent, and did not see any specific items purchased, or changes in the household, when they returned on vacation.

The money that was saved by the women interviewed was generally brought back in cash. Many of the women had saved around AU\$2000 (US\$1450) after a 10 month contract, though this depended on how much they sent home in remittances and how much they spent on the ship (although food was provided, snacks, alcohol and purchases off the ship, particularly in ports was another use of the money earned). One woman was able to save around AU\$5500 (US\$4000) after each contract, but, as with the other women, found it quickly disappear.

*'When I returned home, most of the money would be used for my brothers. If they wanted something I would buy it. They said that they were bored of eating fish, so some of the money went to chicken, meat. I felt happy making them happy. Other things that money was spent on were tools (brothers were carpenters), house extensions, fishing gears, some purchases like a TV and fridge... In the end there was not much left for me, but I felt that I had treated myself on the ship already [through little purchases made on clothes and drinks] (interview 9).*

Commonly money was requested by relatives on outer islands as part of the Kiribati bubuti system. This cultural tradition obliges family members to provide goods or money when requested and ensures the equal distribution of surplus made by a family (Borovnik 2006). The women interviewed commented that remittances would be widely distributed within the extended family and as with seafarers, requests could be made either directly to the woman, or more commonly to her parents, particularly if it came from outer island family (Borovnik, 2006). Money was often also spent on special feasts called botakis which can sometimes cost AU\$1000 (US\$730).

This system of distributing money made it difficult for the women to save. Single women in particular, found it challenging to deflect requests from relatives. While women with children could sometimes justify that they have to spend money for their upkeep and education, several of the interviewees commented that single women were often looked down on if they do not distribute their income widely as they were perceived to have less onerous obligations to immediate family. 'You cannot save' commented one of the women. 'The family always comes

to ask, including people from the outer islands. If they come to live [with you], it is a shame not to share your money with them' (interview 2).

One of the women said that she asked her mother to put all of the savings towards purchase of a property and did not have to contribute to family requests. However this was a unique case as the woman's family already had several people working and earning reasonable wages who could presumably respond to bubuti requests from extended family.

Amongst the women interviewed, only one had used her savings to start a business but this did not last very long because she needed assistance to continue the business but family members were reluctant to help on a regular basis (interview 9). However several other women also commented on their desire to start a business (interview 20).

#### LONGER TERM IMPACTS FOLLOWING RETURN

Following the termination of the agreement between NCL and the Government of Kiribati and changing of the NCL route, many of the women were upset that they no longer had the opportunity to get back on the ship and expressed that they were 'desperate' to get new contracts. They approached an MP (former President) for assistance, and he encouraged them to start a women's group and lobby the government to recommence negotiations with NCL. Around 30 women continued to meet weekly or fortnightly over the next year to try to find out why their contracts were cancelled and to lobby the government to recommence negotiations with NCL. They were organized by one or two of the older NCL women, who would make the arrangements to meet at one of their homes. However, by end of 2012, with no real change, the women stopped meeting.

When reflecting on the longer-term changes in their lives as a result of their NCL employment, most of the women noted that there was some, but not dramatic, impact on how much autonomy they had within existing relationship, such as with parents and husbands. While some additional autonomy was permitted for single women (being allowed to go to nightclubs or socialize with friends), most of the married women did not see much impact of the experience on their relationships with their husbands. One woman commented 'I had a husband and child before I left, and after I returned... It was the same. He was still the boss' (interview 3). Another woman commented that despite attempts to get her husband to be more involved in domestic duties after returning from NCL, little had changed in her relationship.

*'My husband is very stubborn. On the weekends he sleeps, drinks kava.. I do everything... He thinks that he is the boss... It's difficult, sometimes I argue with my husband because he does not give me any support. I must just do what he tells me and what his family tells me'* (interview 13).

However, more dramatic was the impact on the women's relationships formed after NCL. For example, one woman commented that being on the ship changed her perspective on men and women as she saw the men treat women in a 'special way'. After she returned and (some time later) got into a relationship with an older man, she wanted it to be 'on equal terms'.

*‘Sometimes he is upset with me because I want everything to be fair. If he goes out with his friends, I go out with my friends. And he now considers me an equal, not like before. If he sees that I’m tired, he will cook. I tell other men that they should do the same... but his family is not very happy with me’ (interview 9).*

Particularly dramatic were the changes in the women’s own views of their independence, and their views gender relations in the community. More than half of the women interviewed commented that their views on women’s role in a relationship or household had changed or become strengthened in some way. Particularly prevalent was the attitude that being in the workforce was important for women’s independence. One of the women commented that:

*‘After working on ships it helped me to realize two important it was to be independent and not rely on someone else. Whatever I plan it is for the benefit of me and my kids – not my husband. I don’t plan on giving up my job.’ (interview 11)*

For single women, their perspectives of partnership were also impacted. One woman commented that ‘I will not stop working when I get married. It may be hard to find a guy who will accept that. I may be very old when I get married (laughs)! (interview 5).’

This attitude on women’s employment extended to a view that women should have access to migration opportunities. ‘Women as men can make money. Women can work, can migrate, can earn money’ (interview 16).

A number of the women commented that their migration helped them to acquire professional skills and attitudes which helped them secure post-NCL jobs. A common comment was that working on the ship according to the demands of the customers and supervisors, made time management and responsibility essential skills. ‘Most of our clients were from New York and they were very demanding,’ said one woman, ‘It helped us to grow professionally and there was lots of guidance and training provided on the ship. I believe that it helped me to get a new job [on return to Tarawa]’ (interview 10). Other life skills such as management of money were also seen to be very important. Several women commented that being on the ship also helped them learn how to manage their income and how to resist ‘temptations’ (interview 13).

A proportion of the women (8 out of 20) said that they wanted to work abroad in future. This was particularly common for women with children, who commented that they were concerned about the quality of education that their children would receive in Kiribati. Two had applied to work in the seasonal worker programs to Australia and New Zealand, and others were looking to move either through family reunification or skilled migrant visas. Although the primary reasons given were education and access to good jobs, two of the women interviewed also commented that gender parity was important and that this was difficult to achieve in Kiribati.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The study provides useful insight into some of the positive and negative experiences of women who worked aboard the NCL cruises. As previously noted, the broad concept of empowerment can be conceptualized through such outcomes as a migrant woman's ability to exercise a degree of control over use of remittances; the strengthening of the women's role in the family and the degree to which the experience contributes to future plans and ambitions, and the changes or lack of changes in these indicators in the lives of i-Kiribati women who worked on the NCL provides important policy lessons for future migration schemes.

In relation to management of remittances, there seemed little evidence of the women interviewed being able to control how remittances were spent, except where there was previous negotiation with the family and a reason for why money could be saved rather than diverted to bubuti requests (for example, to purchase land). Largely because of their absence from the household and the cultural impropriety of asking their elders to spend remittances in particular ways, the women had little knowledge of, and little control over, household spending except in relation to schooling of children. Although they were better able to track money that was spent from the savings they brought back from the ship, they still exercised limited control over the money when relatives made bubuti (family obligation) requests for assistance.

On the question of whether the women felt that their role within their family was strengthened as a result of their migration, there did not seem to be a strong indication of this having been the case. As outlined in previous research, husbands did not necessarily take up domestic responsibilities during their wives' absence, and instead child rearing often passed to another female member of the household. Upon return to their husbands, few women found the distribution of domestic duties had altered. However, this is not to say that there was no potential impact on gender relations - women who had engaged in relationships after their return from the ship or were looking for a relationship did appear to be influenced in their selection of a partner by the desire for a more equal relationship (at least to the degree that they could continue to work and earn money).

Finally, on the question of the degree to which their experience contributed to increased subjective change in independence, and influence of migration on future plans and ambitions, there seems to have been a dramatic impact. The women interviewed all reported that they felt a degree of change in themselves – either increased confidence in their work, or increased independence in their lives.

The findings of this study are consistent with prior empirical research on the impact of women's migration which suggests that migration has a positive impact on the women's sense of autonomy and independence, but considerably less impact on overall gender dynamics. However when considering the fact that for almost all of the women, this was their first migration experience, and in most cases was limited to less than five years, the degree to which the experience impacted on many of the interviewees' perspectives on gender relations and their own abilities was quite startling. Importantly, it should be emphasized that in the women's own conceptualization of agency in this research, they felt that working on NCL gave them freedom, choice and independence.



This emphasis on women migrants' perspectives is something that should be more fully considered in policy responses. Even though the proportion of women who fell pregnant on the ship shocked some policymakers (interview 21), it should not eclipse the empirical evidence that the women migrants' highly valued their migration experiences and felt that migration channels should be more accessible to i-Kiribati women. The issues of sexual and reproductive health is not specific to i-Kiribati women, and previous research earlier referred to suggests that women on cruiseships have greater autonomy to take on partners and engage in sexual behaviour on ships than they would in their communities, but that they experienced higher levels of sexual harassment (Thomas et al 2013). While the interviewed women did not cite sexual harassment as a problem, some did note that men on the ship were 'very persistent' and they may have felt pressure to engage in sexual behaviour as a result. This suggests that sexual and reproductive health needs to be more fully explored in future research, and that future migration schemes need to be combined with access to comprehensive pre-departure training, which includes sexual and reproductive health. This could help to ensure that female migrants are making educated decisions about whether they want to start a family with a male colleague (interestingly, NCL did not appear to have any policies on this, and accommodated crew members that formed relationships by allowing them to live in the same cabin).

The risk of unplanned pregnancies is not the only issue to consider from the perspective of increased women's migration, particularly in relation to vulnerable occupations such as domestic work. Ensuring that protection measures are in place when facilitating migration in these sectors is very important to help eliminate the risk of migrant exploitation. Pre-departure and reintegration training could include not only protection measure, but also financial literacy, remittance management and business entrepreneurship training. This type of training should be available not only to migrants but also their families, to help ensure that remittances are used in a planned way rather than disappearing through ad-hoc *bubuti* requests.

Overall, this study shows that i-Kiribati women can benefit from migration, and that many see it as a positive strategy to supporting their family and getting access to new skills and knowledge. From a policy perspective, the Kiribati government could consider a greater emphasis on exploring access to migration opportunities for women, so that it is more equally balanced with opportunities that are currently only accessible to men (seafaring, fisheries, etc). This might include conducting market research on labour migration opportunities in tourism and catering, as well as domestic work, aged and community care. It should also include researching further opportunities on international cruiseliners.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex and nuanced nature of women's migration on cruiseships, and the need for more in-depth analysis of future migration that affects women. In particular, it is important to recognize that migration did have a number of positive individual outcomes for the women interviewed and that future migration of i-Kiribati women can, given the right circumstances, have an equally positive effect. While the study corroborates previous research in other parts of the world indicating that migration does not 'profoundly change gender ideologies or that power within households is radically redistributed' (Levitt 2001), this does not mean that the small and important changes in the women's own perspectives and perceptions do not form part of an incremental process that leads to greater empowerment for women.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> With a growing population of 103,058 as at 2010 (KNSO, 2012), half of which live in the over-crowded capital (already above the carrying capacity of the island according to the Kiribati Government's National Framework on Climate Change and Climate Change Adaptation), both temporary and permanent migration is being promoted as one strategy to relieve population growth.
- <sup>2</sup> Seafaring and fisheries employment provide a significant sources of remittances to families living in Kiribati, with around AUD 5.6m remitted in 2014 by seafarers working on German shipping vessels (SPMS 2014). The majority have reported that they are usually expected to send back between 50%-70% of their salaries (Borovnik 2006).
- <sup>3</sup> Interviews were held one-on-one in the women's home or workplace, in a quiet place where privacy could be ensured. All interviewees were advised of the voluntary nature of the interviews and that they could withdraw at any time. They were also informed that their names would not be used in the article and consented to use of other qualifying information such as age and duration of contracts.
- <sup>4</sup> One previous study suggested that there were 120 i-Kiribati workers on NCL ships in total (Quinn, 2012) but many of the women interviewed suggested that it was only 80-90.
- <sup>5</sup> The distinction between planned and unplanned pregnancies was not always clear and the women who said that pregnancies were planned often didn't elaborate on the level of planning involved. For example, one woman said that they had gotten pregnant because she was upset about her husband's cheating and wanted to 'teach him a lesson'.
- <sup>6</sup> It is understood that the Marine Training Centre has so far trained around 50 women in catering and hospitality, who could be gainfully employed on vessels operating in the region (interview 23).

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