

The Economic Status of Women in the Marshall Islands – Is It Really Getting Better?

By Ben Graham and Charles Paul

The economic well-being of women is often used as an indicator of the overall advancement of a society. The better women fare relative to men, the argument goes, the better the overall society is at creating equal opportunities and benefits for all of its people.

In the Marshall Islands, as a matrilineal society, women have always played important roles. Traditionally, women are the keepers of the family and serve as the all-important conduits through which land rights were passed down from one generation to the next. For hundreds of years, women have learned, practiced and taught many important and specialized skills, like traditional medicine and weaving, which have shaped our culture and helped our people live and thrive in the atoll environment.

In more recent times, we've seen a surge in the formation of Marshallese women's groups and more women are taking up key government positions. Women increasingly influence politics and development.

But are these recent events indicative of an underlying improvement in the economic status of women? Are women in the RMI really improving their stations in life, relative to men? More specifically, are they becoming more educated, taking up more jobs and earning better wages?

These are some of key questions we must ask in order to truly assess where women stand in the RMI today -- questions that can be objectively answered by looking at statistics and studying historical trends.

Censuses and surveys carried out in the RMI for the past 35 years allow us to do just this. These data gathering exercises, carried out first by the Trust Territory Government (before 1986) and now by the Office of Planning and Statistics, provide us with the information we need to answer such questions.

The specific variables we will focus on in this analysis are:

- (1) Educational attainment of females (versus males);
- (2) Employment rates of females (versus males); and
- (3) Mean wages of females (versus males).

Educational Attainment

The first variable we will consider is educational attainment.

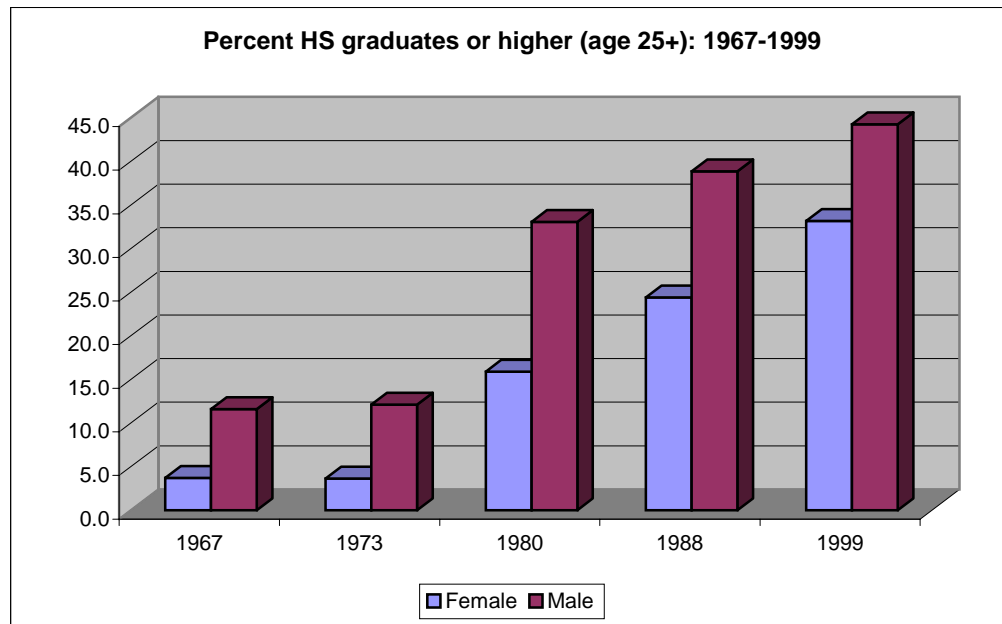
At the high school level, we see that between 1967 and 1999, females have improved dramatically. In 1967, less than 4% of adult females were high school educated. By 1999,

Educational Attainment and Employment: 1967-1999					
Subject	1967	1973	1980	1988	1999
Educational attainment (age 25+)					
Percent HS graduates or higher					
Female	3.7	3.6	15.9	24.4	33.2
Male	11.6	12.1	33.1	38.8	44.3
Percent AA degree or higher					
Female	2.3	--	3.3	--	4.4
Male	5.7	--	10.8	--	9.2
Percent BA degree or higher					
Female	0.4	--	1.4	--	1.6
Male	1.7	--	3.6	--	3.5
Employment rate (age 25+)					
Female	14.9	11.3	17.9	30.5	30.3
Male	80.1	54.0	55.5	78.8	65.8
Notes: -- means data not available					
"Employment rate" indicates percentage of adults who did paid work in government, private sector or who were employers or self-employed					
Source: Insular Areas Statistical Enhancement Program					

this had increased nearly ten-fold, to over 33%, while the male rate increased by only about four times.

Meanwhile, the percentage of females with bachelor degrees increased four-fold while only doubling for males.

While a higher percentage of males achieved all three levels of educational attainment, the rate of growth for females was much higher. So, females are “catching up” to males in educational attainment.

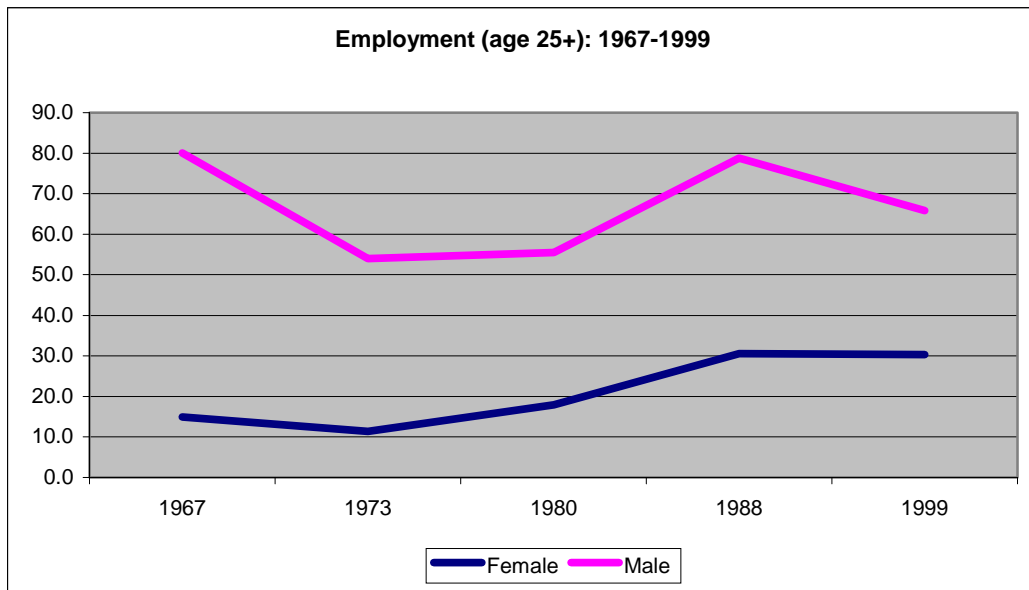


Employment

Education is one of the main determinants of employment. If women attain higher levels of education, then we expect to see a larger percentage in wage-earning jobs.

The statistics show exactly that; while only 15% of adult females were employed in the RMI in 1967, over one-third of them were employed in 1999. Meanwhile, this rate actually

dropped for males, clearly showing that women’s “market share” of the RMI labor market increased relative to men.



Wages

While individual wage data are not always gathered in censuses and surveys, the 1980 census and 2002 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) did collect data on individual wages.

Mean Wages of Employed Adults (age 25+): 1980-2002		
Subject	1980	2002
Females	2,821	6,518
Males	4,891	9,718
Female to Male wage ratio	0.58	0.67

Notes: 2002 figures preliminary
 All figures not adjusted for inflation
 Source: Insular Areas Statistical Enhancement Program

While these data come from different sources and are not adjusted for inflation, they suggest that mean wages increased at a faster rate for females than they did for males since 1980.

The female to male wage ratio, a quotient of females’ to males’ mean wages, increased over time. According to the 2002 survey data, females earned 67 cents for every dollar earned

by males, a sizeable increase from 58 cents in 1980.

We see, therefore, that while females still have a ways to go, there has been a net decrease in the inequality of compensation for females relative to males over time.

Conclusion

Our brief analysis shows that over the past 35 years women have significantly improved their economic status relative to men. While the RMI remains what some may call a “male dominated” society, wherein a larger proportion of men continue to be better educated, are more likely to be employed and are better compensated, women are catching up quickly on all levels.

Special thanks to Dr. Michael Levin

Note: This essay is produced under the auspices of the Insular Areas Statistical Enhancement Program and is not an official RMI or US Census Bureau report. For questions or comments, email: benjamin.m.graham@census.gov