



Summary: Barriers and Facilitators to Female Death Registration in Honiara and Malaita, Solomon Islands

Background and Methods

Despite a long-standing legal mandate for timely and accurate death registrations, the Solomon Islands has critically low death registration rates, with fewer than 1% of deaths officially registered as of 2016.^{1,2} In many countries with low death registration, female death registration is especially challenging.³ Therefore, this study sought to understand the systemic barriers and enabling factors influencing female death registration. The research was co-led by the Gender Equity Unit at Johns Hopkins University and Solomon Islands National University, with ethics approval from both, in collaboration with the CDC Foundation as part of the Data for Health initiative. The qualitative study included in-depth interviews (n=20), key informant interviews (n=8), and focus group discussions (n=4) in Honiara (urban capital) and Malaita Province (rural setting). Participants included family members, community leaders, health workers, religious leaders, and registration officials.

Results

Barriers to Female Death Registration:

- **Limited Awareness and Understanding:** There is widespread lack of awareness about the legal requirement and importance of death registration. Many families view it as optional (especially for female deaths), or only necessary for specific administrative purposes, rather than a civic and legal responsibility.
- **Geographic and Accessibility Barriers:** The centralization of civil registration services in Honiara creates significant barriers for rural communities and health workers in Malaita. Long travel distances, limited transport options, costs associated with death and poor connectivity make it extremely difficult for families to access health facilities where death notification occurs; most severely impacting women in remote areas.
- **Patrilineal Cultural Norms and Attitudes:** In Malaita, patrilineal traditions position men as household heads and land-owners. Consequently, women's deaths are often viewed as less important to record because they are not linked to land inheritance or property transfers. This cultural devaluation leads families to deprioritize female death registration since it is not associated with material benefits.
- **Social Stigma and Fear of Consequences:** Deaths associated with gender-based violence, domestic violence, HIV, or suicide carry significant stigma. Families fear legal repercussions or social shame, particularly when male family members are implicated, leading them to avoid formal death registration altogether.
- **Institutional Gaps:** Some institutions accept burial notices or death notifications in place of official death certificates, reducing the perceived urgency and necessity for formal registration. Limited coordination between the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Home Affairs further contributes to gaps in the registration process.

Facilitators to Female Death Registration:

- **Practical and Administrative Requirements:** When women hold formal employment or assets, families are motivated to register deaths to access bank accounts, cease salaries, claim pensions from the National Provident Fund, or process inheritance. These practical necessities provide strong incentives for registration.
- **Support During Registration:** Families benefit when proactive health workers or administrative staff provide guidance, making the process more accessible. Health workers who actively follow up with families and provide guidance facilitate female death registration.

¹ World Health Organization. (2017). *Strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Asia-Pacific region*. Manila: WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific.

² World Bank. (2020). *Improving CRVS systems in Small Island Developing States*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

³ Silva R, Wahabzada T, Idele P. Advancing legal identity, gender equity and women's empowerment via inclusive civil registration and vital statistics systems. *Statistical Journal of the IAOS*. 2025;41(3):613-632. doi:10.1177/18747655251368376

Note: Pictures of Solomon Island Workers and Civilians by Juan Arredondo, 2025

- **Value of Family Records:** Some families recognize the importance of maintaining accurate family lineage records and historical documentation, which motivates them to register deaths regardless of immediate material benefit.
- **Tracking Maternal Mortality:** Health workers, particularly those in reproductive health, emphasize the need to register female deaths to accurately track maternal mortality indicators and improve public health planning.
- **Shifting Gender Norms:** Religious leaders and community members note that education and church teachings promoting gender equality are gradually challenging traditional views. These shifting norms are beginning to support more equitable treatment of female death registration.
- **Health System Integration of Notification:** In healthcare institutions where Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) system was integrated, families reported ease of starting the registration process with a doctor issuing cause of death and nurse providing death notification.

Recommendations to Improve Female Death Registration:

- **Awareness Campaigns with Gender-Specific Messaging:** Develop sustained, culturally appropriate community awareness campaigns delivered through churches, chiefs, women's groups, health facilities, radio, and social media. These campaigns must explicitly emphasize that female deaths must be registered and challenge the misconception that women's deaths hold less legal or social importance, particularly regarding inheritance and land ownership. An interesting leverage point, in-depth interview participants highlighted the importance of registering a death for its potential to direct national health priorities as well as an interest in honoring female's roles in society.
- **Addressing Social and Cultural Norms:** Engage community leaders, religious authorities, and influential family members through dialogue sessions, community events, and public forums to discuss and challenge deep-rooted patrilineal beliefs that hinder female death registration. Highlight how formal death registration protects women's rights, dignity, and family claims.
- **Strengthening Institutional Coordination:** Establish clear standard operating procedures defining roles and responsibilities between the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Health. Formalize referral pathways between health facilities, churches, community leaders, and civil registries to ensure every notified death is followed through to formal registration.
- **Building Health System Capacity:** Provide regular training for health workers on death notification and certification procedures, with particular emphasis on gender sensitivity. Supply standardized tools, forms, and guidance documents. Introduce feedback mechanisms to help health workers understand how their data contributes to planning and decision-making.
- **Gender-Responsive Training:** Provide targeted gender sensitivity training for all staff involved in death registration, developing their skills in recognizing and addressing gender biases, understanding the unique challenges women face, and fostering respectful, non-discriminatory attitudes.
- **Decentralizing and Modernizing the Services:** Pilot mobile and provincial registration offices to bring services closer to rural communities, particularly in Malaita. Open provincial registration offices, integrate religious institutions and leverage technology to improve data management and reduce the time and cost burden on families.
- **Policy Reform and Resource Allocation:** Update the Civil Registration Act to make death registration compulsory and establish dedicated budget lines for CRVS improvement. Ensure all CRVS interventions are assessed for their gender impacts and actively incorporate women's perspectives in design and implementation.

Even when barriers to death registration may be present for all deaths, these barriers have a disproportionate effect on women and girls, as families or communities may be less inclined to overcome these obstacles due to lack of social or material incentives.

The full report can be found [here](https://genderhealthdata.org/resource/barriers-and-facilitators-to-female-death-registration-in-honiara-and-malaita-solomon-islands-a-cross-sectional-qualitative-study/): <https://genderhealthdata.org/resource/barriers-and-facilitators-to-female-death-registration-in-honiara-and-malaita-solomon-islands-a-cross-sectional-qualitative-study/>

