

Women's resilience to climate change and disaster risks

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The last 5-10 years has seen an increased focus (programmes, literature, tools) on understanding and addressing gendered aspects of disaster and climate change risks, including in the Pacific. We have delved a bit deeper into the issue to inform the design of a forthcoming United Nations Women's Resilience to Disasters Programme, which is relevant to those working in the fisheries and aquaculture sector. To identify some key themes, gaps and needs, we conducted a desktop review and held interviews with a number of gender and resilience experts. This summary provides the initial findings of this analysis.

We are not just vulnerable

Women's resilience, as it relates to climate change and disaster impacts, is multifaceted. A person's gender identity intersects with various other aspects of their social identity or grouping such as ethnicity, class, age, disability, personal situation, where they live, health, household makeup, income and other resources available to them and their control over those resources. The existing inequalities and barriers that many marginalised groups face in accessing their rights every day lead to a higher level of risk to climate change and disaster impacts. For example, post Cyclone Winston, women fishers were found to be less likely to have non-fisheries sources of income (Alyssa et al. 2018), thus placing them at greater risk following the decline in their traditional income sources from declining mud crab stocks.

Women³ are not a homogenous group and it is difficult to generalise about the needs and priorities of half the population. The emphasis to date in the literature and analysis tools, given the existing structural inequities that women face, has often, therefore, emphasised the heightened vulnerability of women in disaster situations and to climate change impacts without considering the intersectionality of risk.

Typically, this has included recognition that, given underlying gender roles and responsibilities:

- women tend to face an added burden of care following disasters as a result of social norms and perceptions that see women as primary caregivers;
- disaster preparedness and response, including evacuation centre management, often fails to adequately consider women's specific needs (e.g. pregnant women, lactating mothers, women with disabilities) and fails to address threats to women's security; and
- structural barriers prevent the full and equal involvement of women in relevant decision-making processes, including those related to disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response, and long-term climate adaptation planning and financing processes.



Women in Keapara, Rigo District Papua New Guinea waiting to fetch water from a spring. ©Vilisi Naivalulevu

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³ The term women is used to reflect women in all of their diversity, including transwomen.



But women’s experiences are context specific, and diverse and generalisations, while unavoidable, always risk simplifying an issue that is deeply complex.

Respondents shared a growing frustration that the emphasis on documenting differential vulnerability reduces women’s roles and experiences to that of victims and fails to adequately account for women’s leadership as agents of change in progressing the gender agenda, challenging the status quo and in finding solutions.

Progress to date: We’re on the right path, but have a long way to go

There is a general recognition that over the past decade, the political will in the Pacific to support the strengthening of women’s resilience has increased. Active resistance to mainstreaming gender and social inclusion – or questioning the validity or importance of doing so – has reduced. There is general acceptance that considering gender and social inclusion as part of programming is not only necessary (from an ethical perspective) but is also useful from a programme effectiveness perspective. This has, in part, been driven by stronger political commitment to gender equality (Palmieri 2016) and by multilateral funding institutions and development partners that require gender and social inclusion and gender action plans as part of project and programme proposals (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2018).

Recognising the issue is an important pre-requisite, but is in no way sufficient for doing something about it. There remains a large gap between resilience programmes that are increasingly designing measures that target women’s differential needs and programmes that are deliberate and intentional about challenging the social norms, systems and institutions that actively prevent women from controlling their future. Many organisations remain at the “reach” or “benefit” stage (Fig. 1), predominately focusing on activities that promote awareness of the programme to women, encourage their participation,

and design specific activities to target women – but provide limited support to women to challenge and transform systems. Gaps in institutional commitment to build skills in gender and social analysis, and involve specialists in programme design and implementation, remain.

We’ve got the tools, but do we have the political will, institutional capacity and commitment?

A decade ago, when we were involved in developing the Pacific Gender and Climate Change Toolkit (Anon. 2014), a common refrain was that we lacked gender and resilience tools that were context specific to the region. There are now countless tools available to support the mainstreaming of gender and social inclusion, but their systematic use and adaptation to the particular context requires a supportive enabling environment. This includes managers and leaders that champion the issue and people that are able to lead and support participatory and inclusive consultation and planning processes.

It was only when we applied the risk screening tool that some of the women identified issues relating to safety, security and accessibility of walkways to persons with disabilities (as part of Tukaraki village’s relocation). Ravulo Naulumatua, Ministry of Social Welfare, Fiji.

Vulnerability assessment frameworks used by civil society organisations (CSOs) working in this area – including Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Oxfam, Save the Children, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, and the World Wide Fund for Nature – provide entry points for documenting the realities that women face. Support to share and synthesise findings from the application of these frameworks should continue. Also, supporting CSOs to include non-traditional partners in their training and application of their various programming tools could help to strengthen networks and capacities for

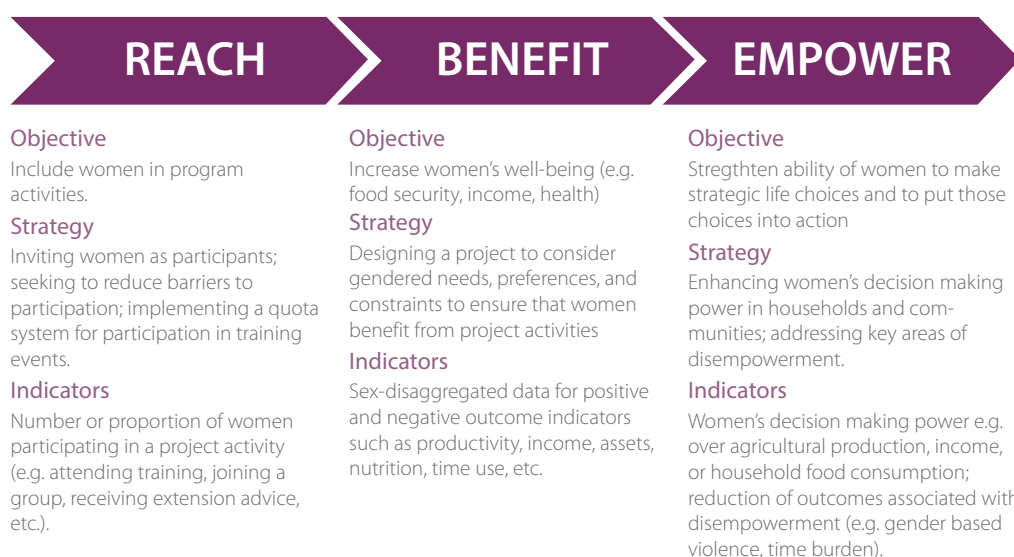


Figure 1. Most resilience initiatives in the Pacific focus on ensuring that they “reach” and “benefit” women, with very few examples that aim to empower or transform the lives of women. Source: Theis and Meinzen-Dick (2016)

recognising critical differences in the practical needs of women in managing climate and disaster-related shocks.

CARE Vanuatu is trialling an approach to train a cohort of gender focal points across CSOs, government and the private sector together in a range of gender analysis, gender and social inclusive monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches. Allowing people to access on-the-job training that fits around their work obligations and gives them the courage to connect with others in similar roles could prove an important part of developing gender responsive programming skills.

Specific gender and social inclusion training play an important role in increasing awareness and exposure to these tools, but education and awareness alone without institutional reforms are unlikely to transform the underlying barriers and structures that prevent active consideration of women's needs and priorities.

Institutional mechanisms in the region have included:

- a requirement that all project proposals incorporate gender and social inclusion through the development of specific gender action plans or gender-responsive measures (e.g. Green Climate Fund 2018);
- the inclusion of protection and gender experts within post-disaster needs assessment teams (UN-OCHA 2017);
- the formation of gender and protection clusters (UN-OCHA 2017);
- the creation of gender focal points in various government departments such as in Fiji and Solomon Islands to support gender mainstreaming;
- the creation of gender and climate change focal points at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations and the adoption of a Gender Action Plan under the Paris Agreement; and
- ensuring accountability for gender and social inclusion within the performance assessments of key decision-makers.

So, what more is needed? Key recommendations for strengthening women's resilience

Resilience building is context specific and should be locally driven

Given the multifaceted nature of resilience, imposing top-down notions of what resilience (and women's resilience specifically) means in different places and to different people is unlikely to be effective in strengthening resilience, and can undermine existing social and cultural networks that are important in maintaining resilience.

There continues to be a gap in documenting the reality of women's experiences of climate and disaster risks and impacts in the Pacific, including the diversity of these experiences. This is particularly the case for women with disabilities, women of diverse sexual orientation, transwomen and non-gender-conforming identities. Strengthening organisations that represent marginalised groups is imperative to ensuring that their specific needs are addressed.

Being context specific requires strengthening partnerships for delivery mechanisms that meet women's needs

Supporting women's resilience requires working with organisations that have a deep understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of a particular place. Working with organisations that have this pre-existing knowledge, networks and long-term relationships with partners is critical. Ideally, these organisations should be women-led and locally managed.

Partnerships between non-traditional partners can lead to a deeper understanding of different perspectives and can be a powerful motivation for change and shifting attitudes. For example, the partnership between Diverse Voice for Action (DIVA) and the SoqosoqoVakaMarama (SVM – an indigenous women's group) in Fiji as part of their Women Defending the Commons series (Fig. 2) has helped to change attitudes within SVM and provide more recognition of the diversity of women leaders in this space (DIVA 2017).

Figure 2. An intersectional and intergenerational panel at the closing assembly of the 2018 Fiji Convention of Fiji Women Defending the Commons, 10–12 December in Suva, Fiji. The panel consisted of 21 speakers from across urban poor, rural and remote communities in Fiji. © DIVA for Equality Fiji



The Vanuatu Christian Council is mainstreaming national commitments to gender equality and human rights throughout its own structures, by identifying measures that support churches to play a more active role in preparedness, particularly where churches are used as evacuation centres, and in working with chiefs to help them see the responsibilities they have to their people in supporting them to access their rights.

Creating links and strengthening networks across political and technical spaces can also build momentum. The Pacific Theological College and the University of the South Pacific’s “Reweaving the Ecological Mat” project is bringing together diverse voices for more indepth reflection and debate of the role of traditional knowledge and wisdom to heal our environment, the importance of identifying Pacific-led solutions to the current crisis, and the need to challenge more effectively the power structures that prevent this process.

Address the disconnect between international, regional and national commitments and plans and their implementation

There is often a disconnect between the language and commitments made in global, regional and national policy documents and the subnational and local level. Lessons from the region suggest partnerships with CSOs, including faith-based organisations, and local government that have existing relationships and networks with town councils and communities. In April 2019, the Pacific Community, along with 20 other organisations, supported the development of the Pacific Gender Equity and Social Inclusion in Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture⁴ handbook to assist with bridging the gap between policy and practice at the community level (Barclay et al. 2019).

⁴ <https://coastfish.spc.int/component/content/article/44-handbooks-a-manuals/494-gender-equity-and-social-inclusion-handbook>

Women from Naga Community, Fiji, preparing nutritious *rourou* for household consumption. © Matt Capper



Strengthen partnerships between institutions working on gender equality and climate and disaster resilience

Adopting gender-transformative approaches to climate and disaster resilience requires gender experts and climate and disaster experts to work together better. Creating spaces and specific work areas to bring these communities of practice together at the regional, national and local level is important in making the connections necessary to facilitate partnerships. CSOs working locally have a greater ability to act quickly and flexibly where opportunities arise.

Weak institutional capacity and commitment to gender-transformative programming

One of the largest gaps in interventions to date is strengthening transformative capacities. Transformative approaches require a commitment to long-term programming and implementation because they seek to challenge deeply entrenched and unequal power imbalances and address the root causes of women's vulnerability to generate inclusive change.

In promoting transformative approaches, the engagement of men has been recognised as a critical gap that requires more substantive work. Working with men and women collectively to ensure that men have a deeper understanding of the issues facing women can help to build supportive networks to advocate for the changes required. Programmes in this area must be carefully designed to ensure that they do not cause harm or place women at greater risk. Lessons from the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre's work with the Vanuatu Women's Centre and Solomon Islands Family Support Centre can be drawn on here (FWCC 2019).

Women's leadership, voices and mentoring

As in many areas, elevating women's voices and providing space for them to work collectively on women's leadership is an area that needs to be worked on, given the low numbers of women in decision-making positions in the region. Mentoring and coaching Pacific Island women by Pacific Island women has been suggested as a tool to promote women's leadership.

Women have always managed to have a stronger voice within the climate change space than the disaster space in the Pacific, and they must continue to be supported to continue to claim that space locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. Examples such as the Fiji Women's Forum and Shifting the Power Coalition represent opportunities that can be built on.

Ensure livelihood diversification is market-driven and informed by experts

Many resilience programmes include livelihood strengthening components, recognising that access and control of resources and income are a fundamental determinant of resilience. However, many of these efforts to support women to diversify or protect their existing livelihoods are not well informed by

private sector and value chain development experts. This has resulted in the failure of many attempts to support livelihoods in being sustained beyond the end of the programme.

Experiences through the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community⁵ and Rise Beyond the Reef⁶ have demonstrated the importance of starting with an understanding of the market requirements and demand, and with and through partners that can connect smallholders to the market over the long term. Value chain development and strengthening the resilience of value chains requires an in-depth knowledge of the local context and sector-based business expertise.

Expand psychosocial support services

Everyone experiences trauma differently. In most instances, little or no psychosocial support is available and the uneven burden of household care tends to rest with women to provide this support as best they can. Lessons learned post Tropical Cyclone Gita noted the limited availability of counselling and psychosocial support services for people who faced trauma due to the disaster and the need for more comprehensive and confidential services in this area in particular for marginalised groups (Government of the Kingdom of Tonga 2018).

Expand the evidence base, learn and reflect

There remains a gap in documenting the diverse experiences of women and in measuring the impact of the difference a deliberate and intentional approach to gender and social inclusion has on women's resilience. For instance, the lack of information and data on women's participation in the different fisheries results in difficulty in assessing the economic contribution of women to the various fisheries sectors they are engaged (Vunisea 2014).

A review of the experiences of Community Disaster and Climate Change Committees (CDCCC) in cyclone preparedness, response and recovery following Tropical Cyclone Pam demonstrates the importance of intentionally taking inclusive approaches. The data showed that communities in Aniwa and Erromango achieved a score of over 70% and up to 100% for understanding alerts and taking the necessary actions in all five stages of the event, and by all groups of the community (CARE 2016). Support to these communities included the integration of gender and social inclusion throughout the activities around establishing and training CDCCC, with special attention given to women's leadership and participation in community decision-making. Where this had not occurred, scores were much lower.

In sharing and documenting experiences, all of the experts surveyed highlighted the importance of peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange across and within countries. The amount of information available online has exploded, and we are not consuming or digesting information in the same way as a result. We need to find better and more effective ways of promoting learning between partners, across agencies and within communities.

⁵ <http://www.organicpasifika.com/poetcom/>

⁶ <https://risebeyondthereef.org/>



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