



## Key Messages | Why it is important to have a gender inclusive COVID-19 crisis response in the Pacific

These **Key Messages** may be useful ‘talking points’ for people working in government, civil society, private sector, donor and other organisations in the Pacific to engage media, government and other partners about the importance of gender inclusive responses to crises.

These Key Messages have been prepared by the *Pacific Women* Support Unit. *Pacific Women* is a portfolio of more than 160 gender equality initiatives funded by the Australian Government and implemented by about 150 partners across 14 Pacific Island countries. It is one of the largest global commitments to gender equality supporting the stability, security and prosperity of partner nations in the Pacific, as part of Australia’s Pacific Step-Up.

### Summary

- During a crisis, there is a **major increase in men’s violence against women and children**. COVID-19 reports from every region demonstrate that restrictions in movement and social isolation, coupled with increased social and economic pressures are leading to an increase in violence in the home<sup>1</sup>. Further exacerbating the increase, are the COVID-19 restrictions confining women and girls to their homes where they are often isolated with abusive male partners or abusive family members. These negative impacts will be compounded in parts of the Pacific impacted by TC Harold.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic will affect women and men differently**. School closures increase women’s domestic labour and negatively impact income-generating activities. Many households will face economic insecurity and women in informal or daily wage work may lose their incomes.
- In responding during a time of crisis, it is critical to find ways to prevent and respond to the expected surge in gender-based violence, such as providing **support to crisis services and other partners as they adapt and respond** to the needs of women and children survivors of violence. These are critical, essential services, that must continue to operate during the COVID-19 crisis impacts.

### Key Messages

Key gender issues during this crisis:

1. Women and girls are at increased risk of violence.
2. Women and their families face increased economic insecurity.
3. The need for gender-inclusive crisis response and women’s leadership.

#### Message 1 Women and girls are at increased risk of violence

##### Background:

Violence against women and girls, including domestic violence, increases during and after crises. Contributing factors to this increase in violence during a crisis include reduced mobility, financial insecurity, job losses, crowded living conditions and longer periods of time inside the home due to quarantine and social isolating.

With states of emergency in place across many Pacific Island countries, only essential services remain open. This may mean the closure of some women and children’s shelters and domestic violence



support services, or a change in the way they operate and the need to find alternative support mechanisms for women and children living in violent situations.

- **Women and girls are disproportionately impacted by a crisis.**

During a crisis women and girls face even higher rates of violence, sexual abuse and control from their husbands, partners and families. Women are expected to undertake more unpaid domestic work, are less able to access essential health services and are more vulnerable to economic hardship.

- **Violence against women and girls increases during a crisis.**

Physical and sexual violence against women and girls, including domestic violence, increases during a crisis as has occurred in the Pacific during cyclone emergencies and civil unrest.

Some countries are reporting a three-fold increase in domestic violence related calls<sup>2</sup> in locations where COVID-19 policies require people to self-isolate and restrict their movement. This increase is consistent with international evidence that during a disaster period, violence against women escalates by 50 to 400 per cent<sup>3</sup>.

The Pacific already has some of the highest rates of violence against women in the world, which will increase during this crisis period. The negative impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on services mean that – during a time when violence against women and girls rises – services are diminished or limited.

For women already living in abusive and violent relationships, being confined in a home with their abuser can be particularly dangerous and put them at greater risk of violence – this may occur during a cyclone when confined in a safe building or evacuation centre or under COVID-19 regulations of social isolation or quarantine. Violence may intensify rapidly at a time when women have reduced ability and opportunity to seek help, medical care, temporary shelter or flee abusive and violent partners. Abusive male partners or abusive family members can also use compulsory home isolation and the threat of infection to control and silence their wives, partners and families.<sup>4</sup>

## Message 2 Women and their families face increased economic insecurity

**Background:**

It is expected there will be significant economic impacts resulting from COVID-19 in the Pacific, particularly for women. Pacific women work to support their families and communities, contributing both paid and unpaid labour to society and the national economy. However, during a crisis they are particularly vulnerable to losing their livelihoods.

Women overall earn less than men and are more likely to work in low-paying, informal and precarious work making them more vulnerable than men to the short and long-term economic impacts of a crisis.

Common livelihoods for Pacific women include caring, market vending, farming, fishing and other daily wage-earning roles typically in the informal sector where income is not secure and paid leave rarely exists.<sup>5</sup>

Market vendors lose income as customers decrease, and sourcing produce becomes increasingly difficult and expensive.<sup>6</sup> Tourism and hospitality workers are often women and among the first to lose their jobs as tourism shrinks. Handicraft industries are heavily impacted as tourism diminishes. Food insecurity and poor health increase with disruptions in shipping and imports. Household incomes shrink and access to credit decreases as remittances from family members living overseas diminish.

Added to the economic impacts, is the additional unpaid labour women undertake during a crisis including caring for sick relatives as health care systems become increasingly burdened and caring for children while schools are closed. This increases their existing workload as well as women's risk of exposure to COVID-19 (as observed in other regions).

- **The long-term economic impacts of COVID-19 will be significant for women.**

The long-term economic impacts of COVID-19 will be significant on women in the Pacific. Overall, women earn less than men and are more likely to work in low-paying and informal jobs such as farming, fishing, or being carers or vendors who rely on a daily wage and without paid leave<sup>7</sup>.

The COVID-19 crisis is affecting sectors that employ many women, with unknown timeframes of when they may return to regular business operations. Women are therefore unable to purchase food nor continue to support their family. Supporting all people, but particularly women, is critical to effective response and recovery.

In addition, women and girls are known to bear the disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic labour in the Pacific. There will be additional care responsibilities as a result of this crisis, which will further impact the ability of women to engage in the workforce. In the Asia Pacific region, women perform 80 per cent of all unpaid care work, more than three times as much as men.<sup>8</sup> Women overall in Pacific communities already do the vast majority of unpaid labour in the home including cooking, food preparation, cleaning, washing and caring for children, the elderly, and sick family members.

- **Women must not be overlooked in economic responses**, such as stimulus packages.<sup>9</sup> It is important that economic responses to crises include ways of supporting the industries in which women work, including in the informal economy.<sup>10</sup> This includes dedicating funding to support health care workers, small business owners, market vendors, handicraft producers and women working in service industries.

### Message 3 Gender inclusive crisis response and women’s leadership

**Background:**

Including women in decision-making is central to effective crisis response. Women are key players in disease detection, health surveillance and infection prevention. Women are closely linked to their communities and will be most likely responsible for implementing formal recommended disease prevention measures, as well as informal response and recovery efforts at the household level.<sup>11</sup>

Women are central to any crisis response as managers of households, frontline health and response workers and carers for sick relatives, so they must be included in senior leadership<sup>12</sup>, national response planning and community decision-making.

- **Being gender inclusive is proven to result in more effective response and recovery.**  
In responding to this crisis, there is a need to understand how crises affect women and men differently, from access to health services and food, to long-term education and economic impacts. Only by clearly understanding the different impacts on people – and recognizing their diverse experiences, needs, and priorities – can we plan the best response and recovery. International experience from crises such as the Ebola and Zika outbreaks have demonstrated the fundamental importance of recognising the different effects on women from men when it comes to planning, response and re-building.<sup>13</sup>
- **Women’s leadership and participation is essential for an effective crisis response** at local and national level, particularly for mobilising communities and health communications. Women are central to any crisis response as community leaders, service deliverers, managers of households, frontline health workers and carers for sick relatives. For effective crisis response, women must be included across all sectors and at all levels, from senior leadership<sup>14</sup> to national and community decision-making.
- **It is important to reach vulnerable groups during a crisis.**  
During a crisis, marginalised groups face increased vulnerabilities, from heightened risk of infection, through to neglect and violence. Vulnerable groups may include persons with disabilities, elderly people,

migrants and people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).

People who are already socially and economically marginalised will be most affected by COVID-19 as they face loss of social services and support and are particularly vulnerable to poverty, poor health and abuse.<sup>15</sup> For example, people with disabilities are more likely to be disproportionately affected by the health, economic and social impact of COVID-19. They are at increased risk of: contracting and developing more severe cases of COVID-19, serious disruptions to the services they rely on, and being left behind in the response.<sup>16</sup>

It is critical to consider the specific risks and increased vulnerabilities of those who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation including by gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, poverty and geography.

### Technical support available for partners in the Pacific

The Australian Government is committed to working with Pacific governments and other partners to support gender equality, women's empowerment and to end violence against women and girls, including during this time of crisis.

The Support Unit of the Australian Government's *Pacific Women* initiative, provides expertise and gender inclusive crisis response support for partner governments, civil society organisations, private sector and others in the Pacific. The Support Unit provides gender advisory services, including those developed to address COVID-19 and mitigate its impacts. Areas of technical advice include: disability and inclusion; humanitarian disaster response and risk reduction; adolescent girl engagement; working with small island state governments; economic analysis; value chain analysis; leadership and decision making; civil society capacity strengthening; ending violence against women; crisis services and response; project design, scoping and feasibility studies; infrastructure; climate change; community development and local stakeholder engagement.

### References

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- <sup>4</sup> DFID VAWG article
- <sup>5</sup> UN Women <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/news-womens-needs-and-leadership-in-covid-19-response>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/notes/femlinkpacific/covid19-diary-in-search-of-markets-that-sell-rakiraki-and-tavua-women-market-ven/10158252681194295/>
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