



Thematic Brief | Women and Climate Change in the Pacific

This Thematic Brief provides information and analysis about climate change issues affecting women and girls in the Pacific Islands region. It has been developed by the Support Unit of Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*), connecting more than 170 gender equality initiatives supported by the Australian Government and implemented by over 160 partners across 14 Pacific Island countries.

Pacific Women is one of the largest global commitments to gender equality. It partners with governments, local and international non-government organisations (NGOs), private sector, disabled people's organisations, coalitions and others to improve the political, economic and social opportunities of Pacific women and to end violence against women and girls. The emphasis for *Pacific Women* is on partnerships and locally-driven development. *Pacific Women* supported initiatives respond to the commitments in the 2012 Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration, while also supporting Australia's Pacific Step-up and its Partnerships for Recovery approach of working together with Pacific partners to address COVID-19 impacts on women, girls and their communities.^{1 2 3}

Three Key Messages

The three key messages provide background to women and climate change issues in the Pacific. They demonstrate the importance of recognising and supporting women's leadership and decision-making in addressing climate change in the Pacific region. This includes during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the socio-economic impacts of climate change and the pandemic intersect to negatively affect the most marginalised, such as those already burdened by climate change.⁴

1. Women's knowledge and skills in managing climate change need to be recognised and supported.
2. Women's leadership and voice in policy setting and decision making for a climate-resilient future need to be recognised and supported.
3. Women are more exposed and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Women are key to addressing climate change in the Pacific, a region containing six out of the 15 countries most at risk of disasters in the world.⁵ Weather-related events such as cyclones, floods, coastal inundation and droughts are increasing in intensity or frequency across the region. For example:

- Extreme weather events such as cyclones are becoming more extreme.⁶
- Sea level is rising faster in the Western Pacific than the global average.⁷
- Island overwash and severe flooding is becoming more frequent on low lying islands, and by 2050 these will be annual events.⁸
- Floods and droughts are more intense.⁹
- Oceans are warming and slowly acidifying resulting in coral bleaching plus damage to reefs and fisheries.¹⁰
- Climate is a threat multiplier, worsening other development challenges.¹¹

Message 1 Women's knowledge and skills in managing climate change need to be recognised and supported.

Why?

Pacific Island countries are highly exposed to climate extremes and are very vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Women in the Pacific intimately understand their environments and communities and have a long tradition of adapting to changes to ensure their families have food, water and shelter. Women are key change agents, for both reducing emissions of greenhouse gases and for adapting to impacts already being experienced and likely to be experienced in the future. They must be part of national, regional and global climate action.

Climate change action in the Pacific needs to further build on women's skills and knowledge, valuing their leadership and contribution from family to national and international levels.

'Climate change and disasters threaten core human rights and prioritizing those most impacted by disasters and climate change must be the priority of all decision makers...as such gender and 'protection' must be central to any activity which relates to climate change and/or disasters.'

The Hon. Mereseini Vuniwaqa, Fiji Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, speaking at the 2017 UN Climate Change Conference (COP23) in Bonn, Germany¹²

Women's and men's traditional knowledge is still largely unrecognised in the drive to build resilience, particularly at the local level. When policy makers overlook women's knowledge and capacities in climate change action, they deprive the Pacific of half of the available expertise and resources that would otherwise make a critical contribution.

The evidence

Global average temperatures have already risen by around 1°C above pre-industrial levels and the consequences are being felt throughout the Pacific region.¹³

Pacific leaders have recognised that climate change is the single greatest regional threat to livelihoods, security and wellbeing.¹⁴ Communities across the Pacific are experiencing the effects of climate change, with populations being relocated¹⁵ and people migrating to escape extreme weather.¹⁶ Less recognised is the need for women's knowledge and skills in managing climate change to be supported and utilised.

Women are already adapting to the impacts of drought, erosion, flooding and reduced crop yields due to climate variability, extremes and change in the Pacific. They are drawing on traditional practices, which need to be valued and supported.

Science and traditional knowledge are being combined in local adaptation. In Palau, when cutting grass, women leave it to protect the ground; in Kosrae, palm leaves are laid over soil; and in Yap, young taro plants are covered and taro patches mulched to deal with drier conditions. In the Republic of the Marshall Islands, women are planting mangroves and pandanus to prevent coastal erosion, a traditional technique. In Kosrae and Chuuk, women are relying on traditional practices for managing drought, including drying and fermenting breadfruit to support food security. During drought in Pohnpei, women's knowledge of the location of traditional wells enabled them to find potable water and build new shallow wells.¹⁷ Women can be supported to share these adaptive practices at scale.

Message 2 Women's leadership and voice in policy setting and decision making for a climate-resilient future needs to be recognised and supported.

Why?

Women commonly face higher risks and burdens from the impacts of climate change. Examples include: increased workloads (such as travelling further for water and firewood); reduced opportunities for education or livelihoods (as a result of increased workloads); and less access to information to help prepare for climate

and disaster events (because women are less likely than men to have mobile phones, which are increasingly used to transmit weather warnings).¹⁸ Given the impacts on women, it is essential that their needs and leadership be better represented in climate-related planning, policy making and implementation.

As recently as 2008, there was no reference to gender in UN climate change negotiations. Since then, advocacy and evidence has shown that gender equality is a critical component of responding to climate change. The 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change explicitly articulates this link.¹⁹ The Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (2017–2030) highlights the need for an integrated approach to climate change and disaster resilience. This includes equal opportunities for women and men for participation and decision making and the use of sex disaggregated data to better understand the specific experiences of women and men.²⁰

The evidence

Evidence indicates there is more progress needed for women’s leadership and voice in policy setting and decision making for a climate resilient future.

- Men continue to dominate parliaments, the public service and formal businesses across the Pacific.²¹
- Pacific countries have been slow to develop and adopt climate change gender action plans and policies.²²
- Women made up 38 per cent of national delegations and 27 per cent of Heads of Delegation to United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meetings in 2019, compared with 32 per cent and 10 per cent in 2009. While this represents an increase of women’s representation, it falls short of gender balance or parity.²³

At the national level, regional and international commitments have not been fully translated into climate change or disaster management laws, policies or practices. Most Pacific climate change and disaster management legislation and policies make few, if any, references to gender equality. Only some recognise the role of women’s ministries and organisations as service providers during an emergency.²⁴

Countries are moving to revise their policies. For example, representatives from national ministries of women are included on national disaster councils in Fiji and Solomon Islands. In Samoa, gender is explicitly integrated into the national climate change policy and, conversely, climate change is well integrated into the national gender policy. Vanuatu is currently considering inclusion of disaster and climate resilience into its national gender equality policy.

Climate change policies in some countries set out specific gender equality actions. Others reference gender equality in passing, with no specific actions. Vanuatu’s Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy (2016–2030) includes gender and social inclusion as a cross-cutting theme with specific actions throughout.²⁵ The gender equality policies of the Cook Islands, Fiji, the Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Tuvalu and Vanuatu recognise the link between gender, climate change and disaster risk reduction, articulating strategic objectives and actions.²⁶ While approaches to integration of gender and climate change in national policies vary between countries, the critical issue is to implement commitments.

At the community level, there is good evidence from the experiences of Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu of the value of women’s equal participation in community disaster and climate committees. Long-term programs to support these committees and women’s leadership led to shifts in social norms. This brought new acceptance and respect for women’s role in disasters, a higher incidence of women and men working together and the transformation of social inclusion from a household to community responsibility.²⁷

Message 3 Women are more exposed and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Why?

Climate change affects everyone but the impact of climate change on a person is affected by factors such as gender, age, disability, poverty, occupation, location and remoteness. Climate change exacerbates existing inequalities, including gender inequality. People who are heavily impacted by climate change are likely to be more affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as they are mostly socially and economically vulnerable.²⁸

The evidence

While all people living in affected areas are touched by climate changes and extreme weather events, those who are socially and economically excluded experience the effects of climate change more intensely. This is because their livelihoods are often highly dependent on natural resources that are sensitive to climate change, they lack the resources needed to withstand climate impacts (such as better houses, drought resistant crops and irrigation) and they tend to live in more marginal areas.

Women and girls are highly exposed to the impacts of climate change through multiple pathways. These include:²⁹

- Scarcer food and water resources caused by climate change lead to higher workloads for women and girls to meet basic needs.
- Climate change results in lower primary production incomes and opportunities for women's and girls' education and livelihoods.
- Women and girls' lower incomes and assets make climate change preparedness less economically feasible.
- Women and children are more likely than men to die or be injured in disaster events.
- Women and children are more likely than men to experience physical and sexual assault after climate change related disasters.
- Women carry the burden of childbearing and a disproportionate burden of care for children, aged people and people with disabilities. This places further pressure on women when adapting to climate change and responding to climate change disasters.

Economically, women in the Pacific are mainly engaged in agriculture, marketing and small trading.³⁰ They are less likely than men to own land and other assets and typically have low levels of decision-making power. However, although under-recognised and under-valued, they also make significant contributions to their countries' economies and communities. For example, the annual turnover at the Honiara Central Market is USD10–16 million with women responsible for 90 per cent of this marketing activity as both bulk buyers and retailers.³¹

Global evidence has demonstrated the links between disasters and climate change, and violence against women and girls.³² This experience is mirrored in the Pacific.³³ After cyclones in Vanuatu in 2011, there was a 300 per cent increase in new domestic violence cases at the Vanuatu Women's Centre.³⁴ In Samoa, research showed that people displaced by a disaster were at higher risks of gender-based violence than those who stayed in their communities.³⁵

Qualitative research provides a picture of the links between climate, disasters and violence. For example, in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the head of a local women's group explained that during drought, 'when they don't have enough water, the woman is not able to cook the food, or do the laundry, or prepare the husband's clothes, and she can end up experiencing violence from her partner.'³⁶

What can be done?

What can be done to ensure women are included when addressing climate change in the Pacific?

To acknowledge women's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and to harness their knowledge, skills and leadership in addressing climate change, there is a need to:

- Recognise the skills, knowledge and unique insights of women in addressing climate change.
- Ensure active participation, representation and decision making by women in all aspects of addressing climate change at local, national and international levels.
- Work toward equal representation of women in parliament, the public sector and the private sector.
- Ensure every Pacific Island country has climate change gender action plans and policies.
- Acknowledge the disproportionate impact of climate change on disadvantaged groups in society, including women and girls, and ensure policies and plans address that vulnerability.
- Meet the reproductive health, education and safety needs of women and girls.

There is global evidence that education for women and girls and access to reproductive health services are some of the most significant ways to ensure women, girls and communities are more resilient.³⁷ Lack of adequate reproductive health and outreach services is exacerbated by climate change and related disasters. These have been noted in post-disaster needs assessments in the Pacific, including those conducted following Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu³⁸ and Cyclone Evan in Samoa.³⁹ Realising reproductive health rights for women is intrinsically linked to building resilience to the impacts of climate change.

There are examples from around the world of women leading initiatives to address climate change, such as Ugandan women farmers' Women's Empowerment for Resilience and Adaptation Against Climate Change.⁴⁰ This association's work acknowledges and amplifies the voices of women who make up a large part of the Ugandan agricultural workforce; yet often their role remains unrecognised and their concerns as farmers are rarely heard at national and global levels. Women-led savings pools have been established, from which women borrow and invest in land planning, agroforestry and soil conservation practices.

In the Pacific, *Pacific Women* partners are contributing to improving the recognition of women's roles and skills in addressing the impacts of climate change, including:

- The UN Women's Markets for Change project.⁴¹ Markets for Change supports improvements in markets' safety and operations plus women's involvement in market management and decision making in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The revamped Gizo market in Solomon Islands, for example, has been designed to withstand Category 5 cyclones and resist sea level rises. Women market vendors are involved in market design and also develop skills in preparing their businesses and families for droughts, cyclones and floods. This project is funded by several partners, including Australia through *Pacific Women*.

What can be done to better recognise and support women's leadership and voice in policy setting and decision making for a climate resilient future?

Climate change and disaster management legislation and policy should be revised to ensure women's representation in decision making from national to community levels. This needs to be accompanied by support to build women's confidence, knowledge and skills about climate change action and disaster risk reduction so they can be active participants, rather than relegated to catering or secretariat services in decision-making bodies.

Evidence shows that training for women climate change negotiators has resulted in greater confidence, promotions and increasing participation in international climate negotiation teams.⁴² Australia supports women in the Pacific who are attending international climate negotiations. Since 2017, more than 60 Pacific

Island women have participated in training and mentoring before and after each United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meeting with Australia's support.

Initiatives supported by the Australian Government through *Pacific Women* include Shifting the Power Coalition, supported by ActionAid Australia, working across six countries and 13 organisations supporting women to lead humanitarian action. Coalition partner FemLINK Fiji, with the support of ActionAid Australia, has Women's Weather Watch in Fiji and also *Women Watem Weta* in Vanuatu using radio and mobile phone text messages to help women in rural areas receive weather warnings while increasing their participation in community and national dialogue about disaster recovery.

In Vanuatu, programs with community disaster and climate change committees have engaged women and men to shift social norms about women's roles in disasters.⁴³ This is a promising community level approach to women's leadership to build on. Supporting gender equality in formal governance systems should be accompanied by valuing traditional knowledge and leadership.

Women's representation in climate and disaster agencies is a key area for development. Women are under-represented across the Pacific in meteorological offices and disaster and emergency management services. While women are training as scientists, they face challenges in securing employment in the Pacific region. Social norms about who can generate science and manage disasters continue to favour men. In addition to targeted leadership there is a much larger agenda for supporting gender equality in addressing climate change throughout national policies and budgets. The Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific - An Integrated Approach to Address Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management (FRDP) 2017–2030, calls for risk informed development. Risks include human risks to gender equality and inclusion of marginalised groups. Risk informed development integrates gender, inclusion and climate resilience in all decisions. For example, when considering infrastructure investments governments should consider future climate and gender impacts while assessing financial costs and benefits. They should also incorporate human costs to give a truer picture of the value of the investment.⁴⁴

What can be done to address the issue of women being more exposed to and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change?

There is a need to strengthen systems and services for addressing sexual and gender-based violence, particularly during disasters. This includes ensuring humanitarian responders take actions to reduce risks of violence (examples include toilets and bathrooms in evacuation centres being lockable, gender separated and well lit). There is also a need to ensure climate change action focuses on women's economic lives, and that women's economic empowerment work integrates climate forecasts. A successful example is the development of a new women's market in Gizo in Solomon Islands that incorporated a climate resilient design and includes some gender-appropriate facilities for women and girls to trade in a safe environment.

Women's groups across the Pacific need sustained support, including access to climate information and finance. These groups are a key source of information on climate change and the specific impacts on their communities, on women and girls, and other marginalised groups. Their inputs are needed to analyse the expected impacts of climate change in the short, medium and long terms. Disabled people's organisations are also an important partner in ensuring the diverse needs of Pacific communities are addressed as they experience ongoing and exacerbated extreme weather events and other effects of climate change.

Other Pacific examples of initiatives led by women and supported by *Pacific Women*, include the work by the Women & Children Crisis Center in Tonga, in partnership with UN Women, to produce and publish 20 stories of women's resilience following severe Tropical Cyclone Gita in February 2018;⁴⁵ and support for Medical Services Pacific to provide sexual and reproductive health services for women and youth following Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji in 2016.

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