As a collection of small, isolated and low-lying island nations, the Pacific region is among the first to feel the effects of climate change – from extreme weather events to other forms of ecological damage such as rising sea levels and increased soil and water salinity. In fact, many Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) are already experiencing some of these impacts.

Socially constructed gendered roles mean women are often more vulnerable to the impacts of extreme weather and ecological damage than men, while inequality limits their ability to adapt. They are often poorer than men and have limited or no access or rights to productive resources that could help them overcome this imbalance.

Viewing women as victims only exacerbates this vulnerability. In fact, women have critical knowledge of their environment and practical skills that can be effective in responding and adapting to climate change and disasters.

A temperature rise of as little as 2% is expected to increase the intensity of tropical cyclones in the north-west Pacific by 12 to 15%, and decrease the average rainfall by 12 to 28%\(^3\).

Since the 1980s the number of people living on Pacific islands who are affected by weather-related disasters has increased from 1.2 million to 18 million\(^2\). It is also estimated that, since 1950, disasters in the Pacific region have caused almost 10,000 deaths and US$3.2 billion in damage\(^4\).

While disasters do not discriminate, their impacts are felt differently by different members of the society, with gender being one of the critical determinants.

Global research has shown that women and children are 14 times more likely to die or be injured during a disaster than men\(^4\). This gap decreases or even disappears as gender equality increases and women are more involved in decision-making processes.

In addition to high fatalities and the loss of homes and livelihoods, women and girls also experience more intangible losses. They are subject to a number of secondary impacts that arise from disaster events, including violence and trauma, loss or reduction in economic opportunities, and an increased workload. For example, after two tropical cyclones hit Tafe Province in Vanuatu in 2011, the Tanna Women’s Counselling Centre reported a 300% increase in new domestic violence cases\(^5\).

Thus women and girls may suffer a “double disaster”, and these more intangible impacts may, in fact, be the real “disaster” for women and girls.

An increase in weather-related disasters and ecological damage is expected to have a negative overall impact on economic and social development. The individual impacts are likely to include: loss of lives; less food availability and increased food insecurity; less ability to earn income and grow food; less arable land available; less access to clean water; and more disease and health problems.

Half the people living in the Pacific region are women and girls. If they have a limited voice in decision-making and their skills are not used, it means half the population is unable to contribute adequately to climate change adaptation, making the overall response less effective.
IREACH PROGRAMME

UN Women recognises the Pacific region’s vulnerability to the impacts of disasters and climate change, how women and girls are disproportionately affected by their impacts, and how women and their views, priorities and skills are often excluded from decision-making processes that shape climate change and disaster risk reduction agendas.

Such environmental change can not only jeopardise and even reverse development gains; they can also exacerbate gender inequality and the disempowerment of women. Inversely, gender equality and women’s economic empowerment leads to positive development outcomes for both women and men.

The IREACH programme is designed to ensure that Pacific women become full, equal partners in and beneficiaries of all disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts, as well as overall sustainable development.

As part of this, UN Women provides feedback to inter-governmental processes, which in 2014 included the Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) Outcome Document. The aim was to ensure the document properly reflects gender equality perspectives and women’s empowerment, both of which are central for sustainable development. UN Women has also advocated for stronger gender equality elements in the document through the formal SIDS preparatory processes.

Through this programme, UN Women collaborates with and helps coordinate regional development partners, governments and non-governmental organisations in efforts to increase the understanding of, and effective response to, the gender implications of disasters and climate change.

UN Women is also implementing a joint programme with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). This will bring together national, regional, and global civil society organisations, national women’s machineries and high-level state representatives to strategise and agree on Pacific priorities in order to introduce...
IREACH PROGRAMME

transformative gender, climate change and disaster risk reduction (DRR) positions to the global sustainable development agendas. The priorities identified in this meeting will also inform the finalisation of the SIDS Outcome Document.

At the policy development level, UN Women continues to support the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) and SPC by ensuring that the drafting of the Integrated Regional Strategy for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management, which will guide the planning and implementation of climate change and DRR efforts for the next 10 years, addresses gender concerns.

At a national level, UN Women provides capacity building in disaster response. Through the IREACH Programme UN Women has supported government partners and UN agencies in Fiji, Vanuatu, Tonga and, more recently, Solomon Islands, in mainstreaming gender in humanitarian needs assessment processes. In particular, UN Women has provided support to national authorities in conducting protection assessments, in the collection and analysis of sex and age disaggregated data, and in identifying and addressing gender-specific safety and protection gaps during emergencies.

THE WAY FORWARD

In addition to its current efforts in supporting regional climate change and DRR policy development and disaster response, UN Women is developing a long-term programme that aims to focus on the following areas:

- Generation of evidence-based advocacy data on current climate change and disaster impacts on gender;
- Supporting key actors in mainstreaming gender into disaster and climate risk assessments, in piloting and implementation of climate change and DRR measures and in assessing the impacts on gender;
- Implementation of community-based climate change and DRR measures.

PACIFIC GENDER AND CLIMATE CHANGE TOOLKIT

UN Women – as part of a collaboration between SPC, the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) – has developed a Pacific Gender and Climate Change toolkit.

The toolkit was developed to support practitioners in mainstreaming gender into the design and implementation of climate change programmes. It provides tools to help project managers and those involved in project design to undertake gender analysis at different stages in the project cycle.

Staff from UN Women’s Fiji Multi-Country Office wrote the module on energy and gender, as well as providing editorial support for the toolkit as a whole. The toolkit has an accompanying training programme which is being rolled out in 2014.
DISASTER RESPONSE ASSISTANCE

PICTs are particularly vulnerable to disasters and extreme weather events, as are the people who live there. These disasters affect everyone, however, women, men, boys and girls experience their impacts differently and therefore have different needs in the aftermath.

In its capacity as part of the UN Gender Group Gender Surge, which falls under the Pacific Humanitarian Team cluster, UN Women has deployed specialist staff to support countries affected by disasters in ensuring the needs of women and girls are actively considered.

Over the past three years this has included flash flooding in Fiji in early 2012 and Solomon Islands in 2014 as well as three tropical cyclones: Evan in Samoa and Fiji in 2012/2013, Lusi in Vanuatu and Ian in Tonga, both in 2014.

The Tongan government, for example, requested UN Women’s assistance after Tropical Cyclone Ian hit the islands of Ha’apai in January 2014. The storm was the largest ever recorded in Tonga, destroying 800 homes and directly affecting approximately 5,000 people in a local population of just over 6,100. UN Women was asked to support the national authorities in their efforts to disaggregate data on the affected population by sex and age. Staff also provided support to help ensure that both the Humanitarian Action Plan and protection assessment were gender-sensitive.

UN Women is now also working to provide training in Solomon Islands and Samoa on gender in emergencies, including gender mainstreaming and gender-based violence.

Even when UN Women has not been actively deployed, the organisation is poised to provide remote technical advice to any national authority in any humanitarian emergency situation, in order to support the overall gender-responsiveness of disaster response.

BAREFOOT COLLEGE PARTNERSHIP

Solar electricity provides an alternative energy solution for remote communities while also acting as a spur for progress in poverty reduction, gender equality, education and health.

In recognition of this, UN Women has been working with Barefoot College of India to train a group of illiterate or semi-literate Fijian grandmothers and mothers to be solar engineers. Not only does this bring solar power to households, it also gives the women themselves an increased influence within their villages and provides examples for other women and girls to aspire to.

Barefoot College is a non-governmental organisation that looks to improve the quality of life for the poorest of the poor across the world by providing support to build self-sufficiency in a sustainable manner.

With the support of Fiji’s Ministry of Social Welfare, Women and Poverty Alleviation and UN Women, 10 women were sent to India to train as solar engineers. They spent six months learning the trade and then returned home to install solar panels in their communities.

To date these 10 solar engineers have installed solar panels for 376 households in 12 villages around Fiji.

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