

WOMEN RESPONDING TO TROPICAL CYCLONE WINSTON

Tropical Cyclone Winston was the most powerful cyclone to strike Fiji but despite the devastation, women have emerged as leaders and innovators, showcasing their strength, resilience and resourcefulness. From day one women have been front and centre, sometimes alongside men, at other times on their own, responding to the needs of their communities. Women have been tending to the elderly, the sick and injured, supporting community members with disabilities, and caring for children who have been separated from their families. Women leaders, women's networks and women members of faith-based groups have mobilised to play their part in the response, especially in rural communities. Women have been collecting and distributing clothes, food, water, babies' nappies and women's hygiene products – items that are essential to families affected by the disaster. In this way, women's increased role in decision-making has ensured that relief items addressing the specific needs of other women in their communities are included in distributions.

Tropical Cyclone Winston affected up to 350,000 people, including 170,000 women and girls, equivalent to 40 per cent of Fiji's population. Basic lifesaving items are needed. Thousands of homes and livelihoods including farms and crop gardens were damaged, leaving many living in damaged or unsafe shelters, taking refuge with family and friends, or in evacuation centres. They need food, water and basic household and personal hygiene items, as well as safety and protection. Damaged roads and power lines impede government and community relief efforts, making first responders from and near the affected communities even more critical.

Three weeks into the response, stories continue to highlight the incredible leadership of women coming together to support each other, to share whatever water and food they have salvaged, initiating joint livelihood ventures, and showing great resilience in getting back to the business of building families and communities. Women are also taking an active role in educating other women about their rights to disaster relief and justice and helping to protect and support women and vulnerable groups, through counselling, psychosocial support, and the distribution of life saving assistance and referral for cases of gender based violence.

UN Women's Fiji Multi-Country Office is supporting and standing in solidarity with community organisations including Empower Pacific, FemLINKPACIFIC, DIVA for Equality, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, House of Sarah, Fiji Disabled People's Federation, Fiji Red Cross and Medical Services Pacific in an effort to support women's leadership and economic empowerment, including as first responders in emergencies.

“After the cyclone, women market vendors came to the market to sit and talk. Sometimes we sit in silence and cry. But now we need to be brave and put a smile on our faces. We are trying to rebuild our lives because life has to go on.” - Faranise



Varanise Kenona, President of the Rakiraki Women Vendors' Club, with her donations for other affected market vendors in what remains of Rakiraki Market after the cyclone. Credit: UN Women/Murray Lloyd.

Varanise is a prime example of women's leadership in the face of adversity. Varanise Kenona, 38, Rakiraki, is the President of the Rakiraki Women Vendors' Club and has been selling fish, cooked food and fresh produce at Rakiraki Market for the past 11 years. She tells of the harrowing experience of sheltering from the storm in her family outhouse with her husband and four daughters aged between 6 to 17. The cyclone destroyed her house, taking the roof and walls. Luckily, she had prepared well and had strapped down household items and food. When the storm cleared she sent her children with her sister to the local evacuation centre, while she and her husband slept in their car for two days to ward off looters. She tells of the uncertainty and stress of those first few days, and the desire to get back to business, to restart her market.

On a good day before the cyclone, Varanise could earn enough to pay for the water bill, her children's schooling, medical care, and transportation. However, since the cyclone, wholesale prices have tripled and local produce has been hard to find. Faranise's ingenuity and determination was evidenced 10 days after the cyclone when she drove 190km to Sigatoka, a main hub for fresh produce, to secure local fruit and vegetables to sell. Since farmers were no longer delivering to the market and vendors cannot afford to go to the farms, Varanise has been trying to organise other vendors to share transport and upfront costs to ensure they all have something to sell and do not have to close their stalls to travel. It is hardgoing but she remains confident and optimistic. Her leadership is driven by her community spirit and determination to

ensure not only her own family but also others can reactivate their livelihoods as quickly as possible.

Right now, women are burdened with extra responsibilities for the care of the family, searching for food, water, shelter, and the financial means to protect their children. At a time when food crops are ruined, roads damaged from the cyclone, and houses decimated, Sharika Rikashni, Dhanbhagium Maraj and Sumila Wati are supporting each other to return to the market to find and sell produce. The women exchanged stories of losing their homes “the roofs of our homes are gone and everything is wet – clothing, bedding, everything. We have borrowed a tarpaulin and tin to put over the roof and will need to pay for it later with what we earn from the market”. This further adds financial burden on women.

Although the farmers are slowly returning to the markets, prices have tripled, making it difficult for women to feed their families, but also to purchase for resale. Women expressed concern about the affordability and accessibility of food. “We have received rations but it is not enough”, Shanbhagium says. “If you are near the road then you get them, but they are not going house by house, and then you have to hire a van to take the rations home with you”. They also lamented that if you live in rural areas, then it takes longer for assistance to reach, so life becomes a struggle.

Many of the women market vendors had stored vegetables and equipment in the market, representing months or years of earnings, but the cyclone destroyed it all. With their investments gone, it will take a while for women to get back on their feet, however, they continue to discuss, plan, and brainstorm ideas for ways to re-energise their livelihoods. They come to the markets every day, selling whatever items they have left, or what produce they have managed to find. Sometimes, just sitting in the markets with other women.

*Sharika, Dhanbhagium and Sumila on their first day back selling produce at the market in Rakiraki 2 weeks after the cyclone.
Credit: UN Women/Murray Lloyd.*



Lusiana is the Secretary of the Market Vendors' Association in Rakiraki. These kinds of organisations are a source of support for women market vendors - including checking in on them, listening to their stories, and organising donations from other market vendors. Credit: UN Women/Murray Lloyd.

“We have lost everything, but our families are staying together and supporting each other” - Sharika, Dhanbhagium and Sumila





FemLINKPACIFIC

FemLINKPACIFIC is providing daily women's weather watch updates through rural women leaders network to ensure women's voices and priorities are visible in the response effort. The purpose of Women's Weather Watch is to use FemLINKPACIFIC's vast network of women leaders to fill the gaps in information and communications, as well as advocate and campaign for humanitarian assistance to target the specific needs of women, girls, older people, persons with disabilities and also those who rely on specific medication. In this way, FemLINKPACIFIC provides a platform for the voices of women in disasters. FemLINKPACIFIC is convening district level network meetings to listen to and promote women's experiences. A group of 30 women recently took part in Women's Weather Watch leaders consultation in one of the affected areas highlighting critical issues of shelters and the need to support young mothers as some are sheltering in what remains of their homes. In some instances as many as five families are sharing one small room that was undamaged by the cyclone. These community forums allow women to share, to heal, and share their daily struggles.

Empower Pacific

Bimla Madavan, Saral Chand and Sisilia Siga are three of Empower Pacific's counsellors and were among the first to reach some of the more remote communities that were worst affected by the cyclone, including Rakiraki, Taveuni and the Lomaiviti islands. They describe their roles as listening to communities to assess risks and needs, linking them with services and supplies and sending findings to the government and humanitarian organisations to help ensure the response targets those who need it most. Empower Pacific has also sent mobile medical units into some of the more remote villages to help ensure that those in remote villages can access healthcare. They tell of the helplessness, fear, anger and depression that Fijians are facing, but also of how people are supporting each other by sharing what resources they have left. Bimla tells of a widow living on her own, whose home was damaged. She was so distraught she wanted to do self harm, but the thought of her daughter at university stopped her. Bimla organised for others to

Bimla, Saral and Sisilia, three women first responders from Empower Pacific. Credit: UN Women/Murray Lloyd.

rehabilitate the widow's house and provided her with counselling and psychosocial support. Bimla also organised for a friend in the village to regularly check in on her, and to contact the widow's daughter to inform her of her mother's safety. As first responders providing psychosocial support, Empower Pacific provides an important service in emergencies.

"The grief they had at this time was so great. You can see their pain in their eyes, in their hearts. They are asking 'how can we start again'? At that point we could only supply a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on." - Bimala, Empower Pacific.

Destroyed house in the Western Division of Fiji. Credit: UN Women/Murray Lloyd.





During the cyclone Salote Tubuna, her husband and 12 children had to move twice - their first house was blown away and a tree fell on the second one. They took shelter with their neighbour, but when their house was destroyed they hid under the bed. The small river next to their house flooded and took all their possessions, and it was not until a few days after that they were able to swim across and take shelter in the Korotala Narara Kindergarten, itself partly damaged. Normally she takes a community transport to get to the market, but they are not running now. Instead she often walks or takes a horse. She was back at the ruined market just a week after the cyclone, but she only had cassava to sell. Everything else that she had planted in their small plot had been destroyed by the flooding. Before the cyclone she used to make \$20-\$25 a day to pay for her children's education, but now she sometimes does not make any money at all. Support to women like Salote is essential to ensure the food security, safety and well being of her and her family.

Salote Tubuna, 42, with her husband and some of her 12 children standing in front of their house 7km outside Rakiraki - the remains of the mango tree that fell on it are still inside. Credit: UN Women/Murray Lloyd.

To ensure protection and support to vulnerable communities, women, girls, boys and men of different ages and abilities, in the humanitarian response, the Fijian Government, with support from the Pacific Humanitarian Team, activated the Safety and Protection Cluster, led by the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, co-coordinated by UN Women and UNICEF. This cluster works through its active members of government, community and women's networks, NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies. UN Women together with the support of the Regional GenCap Adviser and other relevant partners will continue to support women as first responders and women's leadership in humanitarian action.