

NATURAL DISASTERS AND THREATS FOR WOMEN IN PACIFIC SMALL ISLAND STATES

A SCOPING STUDY IN PROGRESS 2006-2016¹

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This working paper maps existing evidence around how natural disasters and their aftermath affect women and girls. While a broad range of data is considered, the focus here is on small island states from the Pacific. The last decade has seen a significant growth in the documentation of the impacts of natural disasters globally. These studies have demonstrated that changing weather patterns and accompanying natural disasters (e.g. cyclones, flooding, earthquakes) do not affect individuals and groups equally. On the contrary, natural disasters often exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and result in drastic impacts on vulnerable groups, especially women. It is thus crucial for policymakers and practitioners working in areas affected by natural disasters to acknowledge that the effects of natural disasters are not gender neutral. Scholarly studies on gendered impacts of disasters published between 2006-2016 have identified a range of negative impacts on women and girls, including high mortality rates, sexual and gender-based violence, reduced access to health services, displacement and discrimination rooted in social norms. While academic evidence is still evolving, case studies from Pacific Island nations suggest that inclusion of women in disaster risk management and mitigation efforts have led to stronger resilience of post-disaster communities.

The increasing intensity and frequency of natural disasters has been recognised globally as a threat to peace and security. A study by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) showed that “disasters triggered by natural hazards caused USD 1.5 trillion in economic damage, affected over 2 billion people (95% by climate-related disasters) worldwide, between 2003-2013.”² In the wake of such disasters, vulnerability of some populations remains higher than others. Small island developing states are recognized as populations with a high risk, as they experience “disproportionate challenges in relation to their geography, size, and physical isolation; these states also face elevated risks for disaster incidence.”³ While geographical location is immutable, existing social inequalities are often exacerbated when disasters strike. Indeed, natural disasters can have a drastic impact on vulnerable groups, especially

women and girls. In particular, this paper explores existing evidence on the security impacts of natural disasters on women in Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS).

The PSIDS is a coalition of 14 Pacific Island states: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Established in 2009 by head of state delegations to the United Nations General Assembly, the existence of PSIDS allows national delegations to consolidate and advocate for Pacific priorities. State members of PSIDS have also taken lead roles in the United Nations General Assembly, Conference of Parties (COP 23), Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the Third International Conference of Small Island Developing States.⁴

Despite efforts to reduce gender

inequalities, the political participation of women in the Pacific remains low. McLeod summarised national level data from the Pacific on women’s participation in formal politics, public administration and civil society.⁵ The results (which can be viewed in Table 1 below) showed that women played crucial roles in leading civil society organisations and were represented well in public service sectors such as health and education, however, remained low in numbers in public management and formal politics, with the lowest regional average globally. These figures are an indication that women remain excluded from formal decision-making processes in the Pacific.

This lack of representation in decision-making is significant when it comes to addressing crises such as natural disasters. According to the Gender and Protection officer from Vanuatu Government’s Department of Women’s Affairs “when women

held leadership roles in community disaster committees the needs of women, children and people with disabilities were more likely to be considered and met.”⁶ At the same time, Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration Trend Assessment Report showed slow growth, of less than 1% between 2012 and 2016—but an upward regional trend for women’s involvement in decision making.⁷ Results showed that on average in 2016 women held 9.7% seats in parliament, 14.8% in local governments, and made up 34.2% of senior managers in the public sector. This increase suggests further change is possible and reinforces the notion that women are crucial in decision-making spaces, especially when natural disasters have grown in intensity in the region.

Country	Number of seats*	Women in Parliament	%
Cook Is.	24	4	16.6
FSM	14	0	0
Fiji	50	8	16
Kiribati	46	3	6.5
RMI	33	3	9.1
Nauru	19	2	10.5
Niue	20	5	25.0
Palau	29	4	13.7
PNG	111	3	2.7
Samoa	50	10	10
Solomon Is.	50	1	2
Tonga	26	1	3.8
Tuvalu	15	1	6.7
Vanuatu	52	0	0

Table 1 - Number of women in Pacific Parliaments. *Lower or Single House. Data as of July 2017.⁸

NATURAL DISASTERS IN THE PACIFIC

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction has defined disasters as “a serious disruption of the functioning of a community involving widespread human, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the

affected community or society to cope using its own resources.” Between 2006 - 2016, the Pacific region recorded approximately forty-nine natural disasters, including cyclones, earthquakes, flooding, landslides and volcanic eruptions.⁹ These disasters have had a number of significant costs, both economically and socially. A Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) assessment showed that in 2015 Cyclone Pam cost Vanuatu approximately USD \$449.4 million (almost 64% of Vanuatu’s GDP).¹⁰ The government of Fiji conducted a post disaster needs assessment on Tropical Cyclone Winston and the estimated value of damage and losses was USD \$0.9 billion. A report by UN-ESCAP released in March 2015 found that between 1970 and 2014 over USD \$1.5 trillion was lost; economic losses increased by almost 15 times during that period and over 2 billion people died from natural disasters in the Asia Pacific region. Anttila-Hughes & Hsiang emphasise that “designing effective disaster management policies and institutions requires that we understand the full cost of disasters.”¹¹ In short, the recurrence of natural disasters continues to cause significant economic losses, including but not limited to the agricultural sector, and this can undermine efforts at fostering resilience.

At the same time, researchers and various international development institutions (e.g. UN Women, World Bank) have conducted thorough studies in the Pacific and identified specific frameworks and tangible areas of development linked to disaster risk management to be considered by implementing agencies.¹² The recommendations from these reports emphasise the importance of mapping impacts post natural disasters, strengthening disaggregated data and enhancing collaborations between researchers, civil society partners and relevant government departments to mobilize resources effectively.

While economic, physical, and environmental costs are reasonably traceable, social impacts tend to be overlooked. As Kellenberg, & Mobarak highlighted in the Economics of Natural Disasters although there has been a steady growth in the documentation of the economics related to natural disasters, various factors such as the socio-economic and political economy of countries affected need further analysis.¹³ After all, research has demonstrated that natural disasters have major impacts on lives of vulnerable groups, which almost always include women.¹⁴ In this context, there is a dire need to develop evidence on the constraints of mitigation and resilience efforts women take on during times of crisis.

While quantitative evidence on natural disasters has increased in the last decade, there remains a gap in further examining the socio-cultural and physical limitations women may face. However, there has been some important movement in this direction. In Tsuboyama-Kasaoka & Purba’s exploration of nutrition post-earthquakes in parts of Japan and Indonesia, they considered specific needs of high-risk populations in evacuation centres.¹⁵ Their recommendations suggested specific nutritional needs (for pregnant women, children, the elderly and others) that need to be accounted for when preparing disaster relief packs. Another study, by Liang, Chu, & Wang investigated five disaster hit areas in China’s Sichuan province and analysed the health-related quality of life (HRQOL) of survivors with the use of indicators for gender, age, monthly income, and education. Results showed that women have lower scores than men in all four domains, and that younger people had higher HRQOL than those of middle aged and elder people, essentially saying women and elderly people had a lower quality of life.¹⁶ These studies allow us to get an overview of how quality of life is affected, but few existing studies address

these issues in the Pacific context.

There are, however, some studies that do consider the Pacific. For example, Cohen et al. conducted a qualitative study with three communities in the Solomon Islands in an attempt to understand social and gender differences associated with adaptation and innovation capacities of communities when faced with crisis (not specific to natural disasters).¹⁷ This enabled them to identify five thematic dimensions (assets, flexibility, learning, social organisation, and agency) that directly impact the communities' development progress. Their findings suggested that it was crucial to understand local and cultural norms prior to understanding their coping mechanisms; projects initiated entirely by foreign agencies without consultations should be thoroughly examined to ensure no harm is caused. Additionally, substantial differences in assets, flexibility, learning, social organisation and agency were crucial in communities' coping abilities based on gender and other social determinants. The study also acknowledged that the evolving nature of instabilities in social systems, such as conflict and disasters, requires enhancing adaptive abilities of communities through resilience building and vulnerability reducing approaches. Moreover, in another Pacific study, Ross reported that the Tongan government's response to Tropical Cyclone Ian in early 2014 employed sex and age disaggregated data by prioritizing access to health services for pregnant and lactating women and setting up evacuation centers that could meet the particular safety and security needs of women.¹⁸

Overall, in the Pacific the major limitations for women post disasters and during the recovery period have been broadly identified as socio-cultural, economic, biological and physiological. While this work is an important start, there remains a significant gap in collecting post disaster data from Pacific Small

Island states and monitoring means of implementation to strengthen response mechanisms. The lack of proper infrastructure and geographical challenges of accessibility between smaller islands is an additional burden for teams working on disaster risk management and response.

IMPLICATIONS OF NATURAL DISASTERS ON WOMEN'S SECURITY

The implications of natural disasters remain diverse across the fourteen Pacific states, however the existing literature highlights a range of ways in which women's security is impacted during and post natural disasters. Numerous reports (see, Chew and Ramdas,¹⁹ for an example) and resolutions passed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSCR 1325 and 2242) acknowledge that the links between women, peace and security and natural disasters can no longer be denied. These studies show that women are more likely than men to die in disasters, face an increased risk of violence after disasters, have limited access to health care, are burdened as primary care-givers and in many instances excluded from influencing the disaster planning and risk management. For example, Neumayer & Plumper's study on the gendered impacts of natural disasters over the period of 1981-2002 in a sample of 141 countries is one of the few that has looked specifically at the vulnerability of girls and women during and after natural disasters.²⁰ This study demonstrated that: natural disasters and their aftermaths on average kill more women than men; that the higher the intensity of the disaster, the stronger its effect on the gap in life expectancy between men

and women; and, finally that women from higher socioeconomic status had a stronger chance of survival. The study also identified barriers such as societal norms as restrictions of women's survival. Damage to infrastructure, lack of proper health services (especially for pregnant women), lack of privacy in evacuation centers, access to clean water and poor nutrition were identified as security threats for women from the few studies conducted in the region.

Similarly, Alston and Wittenbury identified barriers restricting women's participation in responding to impacts of climate change induced disasters.²¹ The study broadly identified physical, financial, cognitive, normative behaviour patterns, institutional governance and structures as elements influencing by gender relations in the decision making process. Likewise, Shteir's research on the gendered implications of natural disasters and links to armed conflict highlights that "disasters create environments where violence and exploitation can thrive".²² It is also important to note that these gendered implications will affect different women differently. After all, Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, & Mckinnon have critically interrogated the absence of experiences of sexual and gender minorities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) populations in disaster planning and post disaster documentation.²³ Locating these experiences requires intersectional collaboration across communities and institutions to ensure accurate documentation of all those affected. Overall, these existing studies provide important insights and suggestions, which can be customised and utilised in administering gender

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specific strategies in disaster risk management efforts, and these efforts need to account for experiences of sexual and gender minorities to ensure sustainable and meaningful response mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

This scoping study has explored factors linked to the impacts of natural disasters on women and girls, with a focus on the understudied Pacific region. Evidence from the literature reveals a range of negative impacts on women and girls, including: high mortality rates, sexual and gender-based violence, inadequate access to health services, displacement, and discrimination based on social and cultural norms. The small but growing body of literature reviewed here is an indication that work is in progress and continues to evolve regionally and globally.

Nonetheless, further attention is required to ensure that efforts at post-disaster recovery do not add to the existing gendered barriers and in doing so restrict meaningful participation of women in the process of recovery. It is crucial to recognise the disproportionate impact of natural disasters on women and identify drivers of inequality. Various social dimensions need attention and analysis in determining sustainable ways forward to strengthen community resilience in the Pacific. There is dire need for equal representation and active participation of women in decision-making spaces to ensure that policies reflect realities of the communities and individuals affected.

Women bring valuable experiences that will benefit disaster risk mitigation and resilience efforts in the region. The need to produce, strengthen and analyse evidence on the impacts of natural disasters and recognise its links to peace and security in the region remain a major area of development. It is critical to promote women's active participation in formal and informal decision making structures related to disaster reduction and response planning.

Enhanced focus on implementation of frameworks (such as the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals) and national action plans around natural disasters with strong gender components will reinforce state commitments. There is a dire need to uphold commitments made and ensure gender responsive strategies are encompassed in action plans. The intensity of disasters and their impacts will continue to increase over time. While they cannot be prevented, attempts can be made to strengthen human planning, preparedness, mitigation and resilience efforts.

This cannot be done alone. My people and I are constantly struggling for survival and we need all hands on deck to save our homes. The support of the global community in recognising that natural disasters are a daily reality and supporting climate action efforts on adaptation, mitigation and disaster risk reduction can no longer be delayed. We are not giving up, we are not drowning – we are fighting!

FOOTNOTES

1. This paper was produced as part of Betty Barkha's Youth Fellowship in Women's Rights in the Asia-Pacific at Monash GPS.
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