

# Indigenous Fijian Women's Role in Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Adaptation

Dhrishna Charan, Manpreet Kaur and Priyatma Singh  
University of Fiji

## Abstract

Climate change is progressively being identified as a global challenge and this has immediate repercussions for Fiji Islands due to its geographical location being prone to natural hazards. The intensity and frequency of natural hazards are projected to increase in the future. In light of such projections, climate change adaptation and disaster risk management should form integral structures in any response plans to reduce the vulnerability and increase the resilience to these potentially adverse impacts of climate changes. In the Pacific, it is common to find significant differences between men and women, in terms of their roles and responsibilities. In the pursuit of prudent preparedness before disasters, Fijian women's engagement is constrained due to socially constructed roles and expectation of women in Fiji. The focus of this study is to outline ways in which indigenous Fijian women can be actively engaged in disaster risk management, articulating in decision-making and empowering them to overcome the existent barriers that limit their capacity to effectively adapt to a changing climate. The study aims at highlighting social constraints that limit women's access to practical disaster management strategic plan. This paper outlines the importance of gender mainstreaming in disaster risk reduction and the ways of mainstreaming gender based on a literature review. It analyses theoretical study of academic literature as well as papers and reports produced by various national and international institutions and explores ways to better inform and engage women for climate change per ser disaster management in Fiji.

**Key Words:** Climate Change, Disaster risk management, Women empowerment, Social constraints, Gender mainstreaming

## Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region is the world's greatest disaster prone area with an account of over 1600 natural disasters in the past decade. Such disasters claimed half a million life's and have affected nearly 1.4 billion people (Yakupitiyage 2015). The South Pacific has been experiencing extreme weather patterns lately. Tropical Cyclone Pam of 2015 was one of the worst natural disasters in the history of Vanuatu while Tropical Cyclone Winston of February 2016 was the strongest Tropical Cyclone ever to make landfall over Fiji on record. Tropical Cyclone Zena in Fiji brought heavy rain and caused flooding a few weeks after Cyclone Winston devastated most parts of Fiji Islands. Noonan (2015) states that there is an immediate need for the Pacific Island countries to prepare for natural disaster as it will intensify even more in coming decades.

Climate change and natural disasters have varying degree of impact on the South Pacific Islands. However, given the small size of the islands the disasters adversely influence the country's economic activity, harm natural ecosystems and resources, deteriorate fiscal status and threaten the very existence of Pacific Islanders (Rhee 2015). This calls for a paradigm shift from post disaster response and rehabilitation to a pre-emptive risk reduction approach. National governments contribute substantial amount of money for post disaster recovery and a lot of effort is required for the post disaster rehabilitation exercises. According to the United Nations Office

for Disaster Risk Reduction (2014), it is vital for national governments to emphasize risk reduction strategies and to implement measures supporting local actions for efficient disaster risk reduction.

Female citizens make up half the population of Fiji and the indigenous Fijian women, comprise just over half of the female population (Fiji Government Bureau of Statistics 2007). The remaining half of the female population is comprised predominately of Indians with small numbers of Europeans, Rotumans and other Pacific Islanders. The indigenous population, particularly the indigenous Fijian women who live in rural communities are facing significant challenges shifting from their sustainable way of life towards the more demanding interconnected and interdependent current market economy (Yabaki 2006). These challenges will be further compounded by the effects of climate change, particularly as the incidence of extreme climate events increase. Research conducted by Yabaki (2006) identifies the women in rural communities to be amongst the most disadvantaged groups who lack the resources and political power to tackle the challenges. She highlights that the Fijian traditional norms and social infrastructures often do not place the community women on equal footing with the males and recommends gender integration in all the policy processes and empowerment to reduce the prevailing gender differentiation which has resulted in disproportionate intra-household resource allocation and inadequate participation in decision making.

According to United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), different set of people have different priorities and also different abilities to cope with natural hazards (2009a). In the Pacific, it is common to find significant differences between men and women, in terms of their roles and responsibilities, daily activities, and control over household income (United Nations [UN] Women 2013b). Women play significant roles in all stages of disaster and climate risk management and are often the first to respond and bring valuable resources to disaster and climate risk reduction and recovery (Lane & McNaught 2009). Inequality limits women's ability to adapt to the impacts of climate change. This vulnerability is aggravated by viewing women as victims, rather than as key people who have vital information of their society, economy, and environment, as well as useful skills, which, when recognized and used, can be effective in disaster risk reduction and adaptation (UN Women 2013b).

International covenants and research has identified and addressed gender based concerns and the need to integrate women's role in disaster risk reduction and development, however, despite some headways, the South Pacific Island countries still have a long way to go to close the gender gaps. According to Whitfield (2012) women remain underrepresented in official governance structures and lack equal rights to build aptitude in almost all development sectors. Fiji has the largest population of all the South Pacific island countries and almost half the citizens are females (Fiji Government Bureau of Statistics 2007). This denotes partiality in decision-making and inability of nearly half the population to contribute industriously to disaster risk management, climate change adaptation and sustainable development. However, on 16<sup>th</sup> August, 2016, 50 women from various backgrounds across Fiji assembled for the first time to actively participate in Fiji's first ever "Women Parliament Fiji." The three day mock parliament sessions for these 50 Fijian women organised by the Fijian Parliament in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), further supported by the European Union and the governments of Australia, New Zealand and Japan was an avenue for Fijian women from remote areas, districts on the mainland Fiji and other maritime areas to gather and provide a platform for Fijian women on promoting women's leadership and political participation at the highest decision making levels. In officiating the opening session of the parliamentary debate,

the Parliament Speaker of the House, Honourable. Dr. Jiko Luveni stressed on the need for Fijian women to actively voice their concerns at all levels of decision making processes. She also reminded and challenged these women to take a proactive role in disaster risk management and climate change adaptation (Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, 2016).

Indisputably, gender is an important aspect of the social structure of communities and a gender based disaster management is critical to improving the effectiveness of the strategies set up for disaster risk reduction (Sohrabizadeh et al. 2014). According to Brimacombe (2016), following the elections in Fiji in 2014, women's representation in parliament stands at 14%. There is a nominal increase from 2006 elections of 11% to the current 14%. However, Fiji still remains well behind the global average of 21.8%. This percentage is below the United Nations global women participation and representation in Parliament, the most influential stator body of the country. If women representation increases, gender roles that are socially constructed and women in particular who are marginalised can then play a more salient role in disaster risk management and climate change adaptation. This is further hampered as women in developing countries are the poorest and most deprived groups in a society (Denton 2002). Implications that may arise due to socially constructed roles and poverty can potentially entrench vulnerabilities and gender inequalities even more. Around 64% of women in Fiji who have ever been in an intimate relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a husband or intimate partner in their lifetime (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre 2013). Additionally, pre-existing perils encountered by women due to discrimination can be aggravated in emergencies, leaving women particularly susceptible to sexual violence and intimidation during disasters (Enarson & Meyreles 2004). Other indicators of vulnerability include damage of properties, displacement, psychological, spiritual and physical exploitation, communal exclusion, financial constraints, food and water insecurity.

It is quite evident that the impacts of climate change and climate induced natural disasters undermine sustainable development. To effectively fathom various dimensions of these impacts and to ensure a sustainable future, gender-disaggregated data collection and analysis must be applied across the South Pacific region (Pacific Island Forum Secretariat [PIFS] 2013). In close knit Fijian communities, women's role is more diverse as compared to men since women are expected to take care of all the household and community tasks. It is the women who have better clarity in terms of necessities for disaster and are more acquainted with coping mechanisms afterwards (Enarson & Fordham 2001). Women's distinct roles also provide skills and knowledge which, if utilized effectively, can be a key resource for positive adaptation and response.

This study analyses academic literature and accentuates on the gendered approach to disaster risk reduction in local context. The lack of capacity of Fijian women in decision making due to various constraints need to be adequately addressed to decrease women's vulnerability in disasters. In particular, this paper looks at gender mainstreaming as a way of bringing a gender perspective into climate related hazards and integrating them into adaptation strategies. Gender parity in disaster risk reduction entails empowering women to have an increased understanding of climate change impacts and resulting risks, articulating in decision making process and leaving behind the baggage of social restraints to be able to effectively adapt to the effects of climate change. As such this paper also explores ways to better engage women for climate change per se disaster management in Fiji.

## **Method**

Journal articles, papers and reports produced by various national and international institutions were studied and significant findings and writing in the areas identified above are duly penned in this paper. Government reports were also an essential source of information for the study. The search for literature was limited to publications in English. The review of literature related to the topic of study was time-consuming and intensive due to the numerous reports and findings that have surfaced in the wake of global warming. The areas of disaster risk reduction, gender and climate change have recently gained a lot of attention and publications have increased exponentially. One of the difficulties faced during research was lack of baseline data on this topic in the Fijian context. In Fiji, research relating gender to disaster risk reduction and climate change was scarce and a lot of effort was put in place extrapolating from the limited number of research material that researchers were able to obtain largely from international studies and research. It is hoped that this paper through its findings, will be able to help generate increased stakeholder interest in the area of gender mainstreaming and encourage more research in this field.

### **Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Adaptation from a Gendered Perspective**

Disaster risk management (DRM) and climate change adaptation (CCA) strategies share a common intent to reduce the vulnerability of communities to climate induced adverse events with the ultimate goals of promoting sustainable development and increasing community resilience. United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction describes DRM as the concept and practice of reducing disaster risks through systematic effects to improve preparedness for adverse events (UNISDR 2009b). With the frequency, intensity and the resulting risks from extreme events projected to increase due to climate change, the practices for DRM and CCA are inevitably tied together. Bringing it into perspective, short term adaptation to disaster induced risks will increase the adaptive capacity of communities to longer term climate changes. Tools and methods developed in DRM in a country can be effectively utilized in the CCA as both fields share many aims and methodologies (Turnbull, Sterrett & Hilleboe 2013). A greater synthesis and coordination between these two areas will assist to eliminate redundancy, increase cost effectiveness and leverage the respective advantages of each (Shamsuddoha, Roberts, Hasemann & Roddick 2013). The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Sendai Framework are guiding frameworks, establishing strategies for implementing climate change adaptation and disaster risk management activities respectively, in Fiji. Ratification of these two global frameworks have been beneficial in generating political momentum necessary to ensure climate change and disaster risk considerations are mainstreamed in national developmental agendas while acting as a guide and foundation for international cooperation.

Gender mainstreaming in disaster risk management and climate change adaptation forms an imperative nexus for integrating women's experiences in natural and environmental resource management which supports building the resilience of the communities to the intensifying extreme events in climate (UNISDR 2008). Importance of the vulnerability of women with equal prominence to their strength during times of disaster needs to be adequately addressed as experience with recent project initiatives on empowering women, have illustrated spin-off benefits for disaster risk reduction, especially those associated with climate change. This

becomes essentially vital due to the shift of focus, in the last few years, from reactive disaster response to long-term proactive disaster risk reduction aiming towards sustainable development (Anderson et al.2009).

Many countries in the Pacific Island regions are increasingly being impacted by irreversible changes along the coastlines and in marine and terrestrial ecosystems (Anderson 2009). In these countries, policies, programmes and initiatives that are dependent on donor funding, warrants a focus on gender. According to Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the lack of data on disasters and disaster risk reduction projects at a local level is a major constraint to improving local vulnerability reduction (IPCC 2012). Anderson (2009) points out that in spite of quite a large number of initiatives, there are still gaps in the Pacific region for making programs more gender responsive to better inform both the vulnerabilities and capacities of communities to cope with climate and disaster related risks. Gender disaggregated data is available in Fiji but has often being applied unsystematically in work plans on ad hoc basis (National Disaster Management Office [NDMO] 2014). Fiji through its National Disaster Management Office together with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Climate Change Unit (CCU) is in process of developing a Joint National Action Plan (JNAP) for integrated action on climate change and disaster risk management. In its progress report, NDMO highlights that gender disaggregated data will be applied to decision making in policy and programme conceptualization and implementation of risk reduction and recovery activities carried out in the country (NDMO 2014).

The social, economic, political and environmental context plays a vital role in influencing gender mainstreaming in DRM and CCA related activities (Kanchana, Amaratunga & Haigh 2014). In 2011, Fiji's Climate Change Unit was shifted from the Ministry of Local Government, Urban development, Housing and Environment to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in an effort to strengthen interface of climate change activities with external development partners. The climate change unit was again reshuffled and moved to the Ministry of Finance this year to strengthen the mainstreaming of CCA and DRM effectively throughout the development process in Fiji.

### **Fijian Women's Vulnerability to Climate Change and Disasters**

It is a notable fact that the gendered irregularity in susceptibility to climate change adaptation and disaster risk is embedded in social, economic, cultural and political disparities between women and men (Aguilar 2009). Generally, women's vulnerability emerge from their culturally and socially constructed responsibilities, however, it differs slightly between Pacific Island countries. Behaviour and roles of women is rooted in intricate island societal systems and even today the expectations of women are guided by strong customary values (Anderson 2009). Fijian women live in a patriarchal society and a woman is ceremoniously subordinate to her husband in regards to decision making (Griffen 2006). Fijian women have very little influence in decision making and not just in Fiji but according to Enarson & Meyreles (2004) women in resource constrained countries "struggle for decision-making power, mobility, autonomy, and a voice in the reconstruction process". The gravity of gender inequality issues in developing nations have huge influence on the way climate related risks are managed. As per IPCC (2014) definition of 'vulnerability encompasses a variety of concepts including sensitivity or susceptibility to harm and lack of capacity to cope and adapt'. Various study have highlighted a number of factors that increase women's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and

disasters, all of which are also applicable to the Fijian women considering the fact that Fiji to some extent is still characterised by gender inequality and eminently gendered division of labour (McKinnon et al. 2016). Gender inequalities in Fiji are pronounced in economic opportunities with underlying biases across occupational sectors with women representing only 36 % of the economically active participation (Asian Development Bank [ADB] 2014). There has been an increase in women's self-employment in the recent years; however women still make up only 20 % of the registered micro and small business (ABD 2014). There are a number of factors that affect the vulnerabilities of Fijian women.

### **Limited Access to Land**

Women often have some level of access to land and resources but have restricted control over it because generally they are not the owners and are powerless when it comes to making decisions (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2010a). In Fiji, most land is categorized as customary land, which is maintained communally by the members of *mataqali* (Fijian clan or landowning unit) and women hardly inherit privileges to use customary land (ADB 2006). Women play a significant role in agriculture and partial rights to land entitlements make women more vulnerable to impacts of climate change and disaster (Mitchell 2010).

### **Reliance on Natural Resources**

Women in developing states are greatly reliant on natural resources that are highly at risk from disasters and other impacts of climate change. Women are often traditionally responsible for collecting and storing water, backyard gardening, rearing livestock, securing food and fuel for cooking (UN Women 2009). According to IPCC (2014), climate change is expected to weaken food security, undermine the continued provision of fisheries production and other ecosystem resources, and decrease renewable surface water and groundwater. This when coupled with partial access to land makes women very susceptible to climate related hazards. Women in rural areas are often in a situation where they are inequitably affected by climate change (UNDP 2010a). Fijian women generally cultivate crops, collect and store water, prepare meals and gather firewood. iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) women are also committed to coastal harvesting and seafood processing for the household (Lambeth et al. 2002). As enunciated by Higelin (2016), women in Fiji's rural communities play key role in securing food and rely on agriculture for livelihood and are forced to cope with disproportionate effects of threats following severe cyclones as was experienced by many in the case of Tropical Cyclone Winston that hit Fiji early this year.

### **Gendered Exposure to Disasters**

Climate-related extremes, such as droughts, heat waves, cyclones, floods, and wildfires, makes many human structures and some ecosystems very susceptible to existing climate inconsistency (IPCC 2014). As described by Neumayer & Plümper (2007), in societies with low socioeconomic status of women, natural disasters will kill directly, and indirectly more women than men in post disaster related events. Terry (2009) argues that women tend to be more vulnerable due to their partial access to resources, physical mobility and the cultural and social obligations which usually stipulate responsibilities of women and men. Women are also

relatively vulnerable in post disaster circumstances. Fijian rural women usually have their meal after the men of the family have eaten (Jones 2009). This cultural practice can affect woman disproportionately as they suffer from food shortages following disaster. In addition, women are exposed to sexual harassment and coercion, unwanted pregnancies, susceptibility to diseases and financial burden after disasters which could also result in girls being forced to quit education or get married at an early age (UNDP 2010b). In a study conducted by UN Women on Gender Sensitivity in Disaster Management during the 2012 floods in Fiji, it was revealed that disasters increase social vulnerabilities, in particular women taking refuge in evacuation centres are susceptible to abuse and in certain situations, societal systems break down during emergencies, leaving certain groups particularly women and girls more vulnerable to exploitation (2013a).

### **Limited Role in Decision Making**

Women have limited say in policies regarding climate change and disaster risk management and are often underrepresented in decision-making processes at the community, national and international levels (International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN] 2007). Women's vulnerability amplifies because of their trivial presence in decision-making process, and results in the exclusion of their problems from the community deliberations and policy forums (Lambrou & Piana 2006). Yabaki (2006 p. 36) argues that 'the low status of women is rooted in the male dominated traditional institutions and socio-economic infrastructures where power and decision-making has remained in the hands of men in all communities throughout the world'. In Fiji, decision-making processes are engrained in traditional values. Women continue to be unheeded during decision making from household to national level (Taylor & Michael 2014). Fijian women in most communities were left out from decisions regarding relief priorities which left them in a turmoil (Higelin 2016). Women also have very little control over family finance and properties and so have only slight influence over community action plans for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. However, the recently developed guideline on "Pacific Gender & Climate Change Toolkit" serves as an effective manual for practitioners supporting communities with developing community action plans for CCA and DRM to take a gendered approach to participatory decision making, employing strategies and methods to ensure women's voice are included in community planning processes (Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) 2013).

### **Poverty and Lack of Proper Awareness**

Women also have restricted access to education, current information, scientific knowledge and technology (Yavinsky 2012). According to an analysis carried out by the Asian Development Bank, the gender parity in educational attainment in Fiji fares quite well compared to other Pacific Island countries, however a noticeable gender inequality in gaining employment afterwards exists with more men employed compared to women (ADB 2014). This coupled with limited mobility and poverty reduces women adaptive capacity. Lower income and economic insecurity in concert with the social norms restrict women's participation in social clubs, education and training, politics and other avenues, the lack of which fortifies the sequence of vulnerability (UN Women 2009). Women's lack of access to proper information and interpretation of it can affect their capacity to comprehend and act on guidelines vis-à-vis climate related risks and adaptation procedures. Generally, in Fiji there is lack of awareness and

understanding of climate change related issues especially amongst the poor vulnerable communities and there is a pressing need to raise awareness among the general public on climate change and disaster risk management (Fiji Climate Change Unit 2012).

### **Fijian Women as Key Players in Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction**

A gender perspective to disaster risk reduction recognizes gender-specific abilities and vulnerabilities to avert, prepare, endure, and recuperate from disasters (Habtezion 2012). The negative effects triggered by the escalating vulnerabilities and gender stereotyping are adding to the complexity of disaster risk reduction strategies and although women are at greater risk than men in climate related hazard, it is the women who make it possible for the community to cope with disasters because of their social role which is central to the management of a disaster coping strategy. Drawing from these, there are some contributions that accentuate the role of women in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

Local women's group in Totoya Island in Fiji are complementing their traditional knowledge of food processing and conservation with modern technology, to increase food security on the island. Coastal flooding and degradation as a result of climate change impacts is intensifying food security issues on the island. Women are receiving training on usage of solar dryers in making flour from cassava (root crop) and breadfruit (fruit) commonly found in Fiji to replace the imported wheat flour, which is also quite expensive (Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) 2015). In another case, a project by UN Women was implemented in remote areas of Fiji whereby women were trained in media interaction and their capacity to respond to natural hazards through increased media interaction and community radio programme was enhanced. This training improved community response during emergencies.

### **Traditional Knowledge and Vast Local Experience**

Through their own gendered knowledge and actions, both men and women can aggravate or reduce the likely impacts of climate related hazards (Lane & McNaught 2009). Women have widespread local knowledge, particularly because of their elaborate association with the natural resources and high dependence on natural reserves (Adeniji 2011). For instance, as part of their daily routine women are responsible for water collection, storage and to ensure availability of safe drinking water for the family (Ajani et al. 2013). Often women have unique mechanisms for conserving water and this is of utmost importance during disasters. Women in agriculture are common examples of women adapting to climate change. They are the custodians of essential customary knowledge and play a significant role in preserving agricultural genetic diversity (UNDP 2009). Chiduku (2015) stated that women embrace knowledge and skills that can be part of the solution to climate change. Dry spell and flooding are becoming more frequent in Fiji and affecting many communities throughout Fiji. The values of family and societal camaraderie boost strength and resilience in the South Pacific Island countries. Pacific women are key to a successful family and can configure adaptive mechanisms in vulnerable areas through their intricate knowledge base. As a result, local communities have created innovative techniques to ensure food and water security. For instance, *Tivoli* (wild yam) and *kumala* (sweet potato) are usually used in times of drought to replace vegetables as they grow all throughout the year (McNamara & Prasad 2013).

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) stated that following tropical cyclone Winston, majority of the Fijians faced the problem of lack of food and clean drinking water and many were left without a shelter (ADRA New Zealand 2016). Water storage and food preservation techniques practiced by women are vital to the wellbeing of the family in times natural disasters. For instance, *tavioka* (Cassava) is the most nurtured and consumed staple crop in Fiji and is simmered before consumption. In the cyclone season women often preserve *tavioka* using a drying technique to ensure availability of it during disasters. McNamara & Prasad (2013) explained that Fijian women usually cultivate tuber type crops that mature quickly as these can avoid complications with food shortages, while they restore their farms and gardens following disasters. Fijian women were also among the first to commence reconstruction of the houses and attend to the needs of their family after the disastrous Tropical Cyclone Winston.

### **Inclusion of Women in Decision Making**

Women are usually present in smaller numbers in formal and informal decision-making processes and discussions on disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation and are less likely to receive critical information for emergency preparedness (UNDP Pacific Centre 2008). The community based disaster risk action plan must be gender sensitive to incorporate full participation of women who are often missing from disaster management process. This means moving away from traditional norms and recognizing women's contribution in the decision making process at community, national level and international level (ADB 2006). Women share a close relationship with the environment and are sometimes more aware of traditional systems that can provide a way forward for CCA and DRM. Fijian Women especially in rural areas stay home mostly and rightly understand the needs of their family and are well acquainted with the characteristics of their community and land. These features make them key actors in the process of decision-making on disaster preparedness and response (Miller 2016). Equal participation of men and women in disaster and climate related deliberations in Fiji is being given serious thought, however, more studies and gender analysis needs to be carried out to practically engage women in fulfilling initiatives towards building community resilience. Dynamically engaging women at every level of decision making process and continually updating women on climate related issues and new information can prove to be an effective tool in combating the negative impacts of climate change. For instance, considering the fact that in developing countries, rural women contribute in production of about 60-80 percent of the food and are the main producers of the world's staple crops, the agricultural cultivation of resistant crops could enrich agricultural production and increase food security and revenue (Ajani 2009).

### **Women Empowerment**

As emphasized in a policy brief by United Nations Development Program (2012), "gender equality and women's empowerment are central to development, environmental sustainability and achievement of the million development goals". Several literature emphasize that women are quick to respond to disasters by swiftly mobilizing people in the different stages of the risk management cycle (Bathg 2010). Climate projects that are gender balanced and include meaningful contribution by women have higher probability of achieving successful outcomes. Several barriers suppress women's capacity to deal with climate related hazards, however, with proper awareness, early warning drills, and specialized training coupled with

technical support, women will definitely emerge as effective agents of change (Bathg 2010). As experienced by climate change adaptation project managers in Fiji, having women facilitators, benefits the project from increased teamwork with a wider base of community members ((UNDP Pacific Centre 2008). “Rural Women Light up the Pacific” programme provided 10 Fijian women with training opportunity for six months in India. These women returned to their communities and have mounted solar panels for 376 households in 12 communities around Fiji. The programme did not only promote renewable energy but also provided an alternative source of income to the women and acted as a motivation factor for other women and girls to think beyond the traditional gendered responsibilities (UN Women 2014). Integrating gender perspectives into DRR and policy framework and ventures will enhance disaster management efficacy and sustainability. Funding prospects that target climate related adversities must leverage gender impartiality and women's empowerment.

### **Gender Mainstreaming**

Gender mainstreaming is a process centred on ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities including policy development, research, advocacy/ dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects (United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women 2001). It is an approach ensuring that women's, as well as men's apprehensions and experiences form an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in spheres of life in order to benefit them equally despite the biological differences between the sexes (United Nations [UN] 1997).

As stated by Nelson (2008), Fiji is committed to gender mainstreaming, however there is still some gap between gender mainstreaming and its application. Nelson further explains that gender mainstreaming in Fiji is not well structured and integrated in the policy framework due to insufficient technical capacity of the Ministry of Women's affairs to influence the development of gender equality outcomes particularly after the 2006 military coup which aggravated the political situation in Fiji. The 2014 Fiji National election have returned Fiji to democracy and have seen some recognition by the government in relation to gender equality being essential for effective action on climate change (Pacific Island Development Forum Secretariat 2015)

At the World Wide Views citizens consultation process on climate and energy in Fiji, 93% of the women expressed major concern about climate change and almost 58% agreed that measures to climate change means an opportunity to improve the quality of life (Singh et al. 2015). The Fiji National Gender policy realizes the need for a gender inclusive climate change and disaster relief strategy and is fully supportive of the “Strategy for Climate and Disaster Resilient Development in the Pacific (SRDP)” which has been introduced to incorporate disaster and climate risk management into a principal regional policy agenda (National Gender Policy for the Republic of Fiji, 2014)

The “Strategy for Climate and Disaster Resilient Development in the Pacific (SRDP)” is the most recent regional policy tool that provides improved guidance towards climate change and disaster risk management. It provides a holistic approach to managing disaster and climate related risks and recognises the need to integrate a gender balanced approach towards achieving a resilient Pacific Community amongst other processes (Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) 2014). This strategy adopts a regional approach and provides a much needed implementation framework, however, previous reports have revealed that despite legislative

sureties, there is still gender inequality in decision making, access to justice and economy participation in the Pacific (Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development [PACE-SD] 2011). This emerges from the fact that approaches to mainstreaming disaster and climate risk management lack explicit methodology and uniformity. Gender mainstreaming also continues to be a challenge in the Fiji's Forestry division despite Fiji Government sanctioning its commitment to global programmes and upgrading policy frameworks to empower women to fully engage in socio-economic progression of the country. This is mainly due to women being underrepresented in the higher executive positions and lack of budgetary allocations for explicitly addressing gender equality issues in the forestry sector (Vuki & Elder 2014).

A research project by Fiji Women's Forum on Public Perceptions of Women in Leadership reveals that 'culture' is a barrier to women's greater political participation. A study that involved 1211 men and women in rural and urban areas of two of Fiji's mainland Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, 25 Focus Group Discussions and 8 key informant interviews provided a snapshot into community's perception of women in politics and leadership roles. 81% of the respondents agreed that women are underrepresented in Fiji while 72% thought it would be better for the country if there were more women in national government. Majority of the respondents also identified cultural barriers, discrimination and lack of support at community level as major reasons women avoid politics. It was also interesting to note that majority of the Fijian women believe that they would make better political leaders than men and also strongly believed that they have traits such as being honest, hardworking and intelligent which would enable women to be better at decision making (Fiji Women's Forum on Public Perceptions of Women in Leadership 2014).

Good practises related to gender and climate change usually occur in isolation and lack of proper monitoring and evaluation process does not offer much to support gender mainstreaming in climate change adaptation and mainstreaming. The individual Pacific Island nations need to use guiding principles from the "Strategy for Climate and Disaster Resilient Development in the Pacific (SRDP)" and work towards own national gender mainstreaming policies within the context of climate change adaptation and mitigation. The Pacific gender and climate change toolkit (South Pacific Community 2013) expounds mainstreaming gender by conducting gender analyses to effectively update different phases in the project and programme development. This strategy will address the needs of all community members equally and eventually lead to overall increased community resilience.

### **Synopsis**

Climate change is surfacing as a serious global issue with the potential to cause more destruction to the developing nations already suffering from political, economic, social and environmental privations. It will also intensify the severity and frequency of climate related risks and increase people's vulnerability to these threats even more in the coming years. The Asia-Pacific region is more vulnerable than other countries. Various countries including the Pacific Island countries exhibit indecisive manifestations of gender inequality. Although some progress has been made to abate the gender gaps, in all Pacific Island countries, a number of significant differences exist between men and women. The gendered inequality in susceptibility to climate related hazards tend to affect more women than men. The vulnerability of women to the effects of climate change is mainly due to their dependency on natural resources, their gendered social responsibility of procuring water and food, limited power in decision making process and their

increased exposure to risks during times of disasters and severe weather crises. However, women also bring exceptional experiences and valued expertise that would benefit disaster risk management and preparedness. By dissociating women from their social constraints, stimulating their inimitable capacities and empowering women it is possible to fortify community resilience and promote gender parity. Mainstreaming gender into CCA and DRM offers an opportunity to review gender relations in society from different viewpoints and promote gender equality in socioeconomic development.

### **Conclusion**

Women's vulnerability is imbedded mainly in social, economic, education, awareness, geographic and political disparities across all levels. Gender-based exposure to disaster risk must not conceal women's enormous contributions in all stages of disaster risk reduction cycle. It is therefore vital that gender equality contemplations, along with the different needs, perceptions and knowledge of both men and women be taken into consideration when planning local and national level of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation strategies. Women's empowerment and positive presence in decision making process is imperative for disaster risk management, and environmental sustainability along with essential components of investments towards accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals and effectively adapting to climate change impacts. In Fiji, the major factor discouraging women is their inconsequential participation in political and other forms of decision; however, Fiji as a small developing island nation has made some progress through regular advocacy. The challenge now is to recognize some practical ways and means to completely incorporate the knowledge and experiences of women in risk reduction planning and decision making.

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