

# CLIMATE CHANGE, DISASTERS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE PACIFIC

## BACKGROUND

Earthquakes, severe flooding, and tropical storms regularly affect the Pacific region, and these climate-related hazards are expected to increase further as the climate changes. Globally, during the period of 2000-2009, there were three times as many disasters as there were between 1980-1989. The number of people living in the Pacific region who have been affected by disasters has increased from 1.2 million to 18 million since 1980. Impacts include death and injury; destruction of homes and infrastructure such as hospitals and schools; and loss of assets and livelihoods. The socio-economic impacts of disasters can erode development gains and threaten sustainable development. In particular, global evidence shows that sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) increases during and after disasters.

SGBV is an existing, persistent, and prevalent problem across the Pacific. Studies conducted in six Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) focused on women's life-time experiences of violence. Of the women surveyed, 60-80% had experienced forms of physical or sexual violence by partners or others<sup>1</sup>. Women of all ages are affected, including young girls, and types of violence include assault, rape, and sexual abuse of children<sup>2</sup>. The perpetrators of violence were almost always intimate partners and family members, and low reporting rates mean this problem is largely invisible<sup>3</sup>. In situations of disaster, SGBV is a pervasive factor which heightens existing vulnerabilities. Unless effective mechanisms to address SGBV are put in place, an increase in climate-related disasters in the Pacific will put women at greater risk of SGBV.

This brief is part of UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office's series on the links between climate change, gender, and a number of development issues including women's economic empowerment, health, food security, and energy. UN Women would like to acknowledge contributions from Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Secretariat of the Pacific Community in drafting these publications.



## KEY MESSAGES

- Climate change effects exacerbate existing gender inequalities, often resulting in more negative impacts for women.
- During and after disasters, women are at greater risk of SGBV, including rape, sexual exploitation, and assault.
- In addition to violating human rights, violence impedes development gains, as it undermines physical and mental health, prevents women from assuming leadership and decision-making roles, and impacts the economy through increased health expenditure and reduced productivity. This threatens achievement of sustainable development.
- Humanitarian actors should take into account already high levels of SGBV when responding to disasters and designing policies.
- Communities, humanitarian actors, and key service providers must ensure essential measures are taken, in line with global standards, to provide a comprehensive protection response for women and girls during and after disasters.
- Existing data and the collection of new data should be disaggregated by sex and analysed to promote research and policies that effectively combat violence.

# 7%

The estimated percentage of Fiji's GDP that is spent on addressing sexual and gender-based violence<sup>7</sup>.

# 300%

The increase in new domestic violence cases reported by the Tanna Women's Counselling Centre after two tropical cyclones hit Tafe Province in Vanuatu in 2011<sup>8</sup>.

# 73%

of women in Solomon Islands believe that it is acceptable for a man to beat his wife<sup>9</sup>.

# 68%

of women in Kiribati have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a husband or intimate partner<sup>10</sup>.

## DIFFERENTIAL IMPACTS

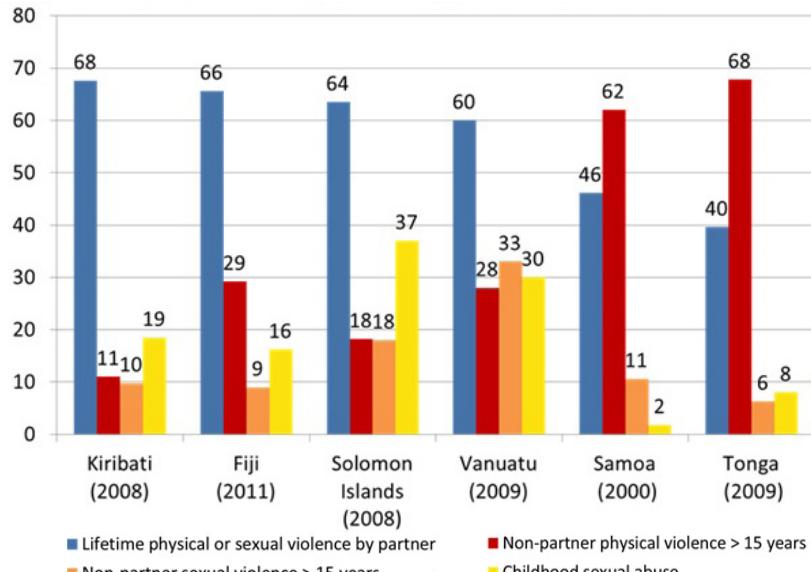
Disasters do not discriminate, but the impacts are experienced differently by women, girls, boys, and men; and they use distinct coping mechanisms in response. Women are affected more significantly than men by disasters, due to gender inequalities and power imbalances in access to resources and relevant information; in particular, women and girls face an increased risk of SGBV.

Many people are displaced during and after disasters. Displacement can lead to an increase in both violence itself, and the visibility of pre-existing violence, due to over-crowded and unsafe living conditions in evacuation centres, temporary housing, and shelters. Women staying in shelters are often exposed to rape, harassment, discrimination and violence and have limited access to reproductive health services. Global experience shows government services such as police and health services are less effective following disasters, due to overworked staff and strained resources, as well as damage to critical infrastructure, which means there is often nowhere for survivors to seek help. Medical services, already overwhelmed by the emergency often do not meet the needs of survivors of violence; where services are available, there is often a lack of privacy for women. The loss of homes, livelihoods, community and family protection increase vulnerability to violence. Increased levels of poverty and scarce resources, due to loss of assets and income, can limit choices and opportunities for women.

The impacts of SGBV are severe and affect all members of the community. Health impacts include sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), unwanted pregnancies, pain, mental health problems, and post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>4</sup>. Children in families where violence is present are much more likely to be abusive or abused, which continues the cycle of violence<sup>5</sup>. Risk of SGBV is not limited to those directly affected by disasters. For example, female relief workers involved in distribution of food and non-food items after disasters experience conflict and threats of violence, and reported feeling vulnerable and unsafe. Additionally, SGBV does not only impact individual families and communities but also national and regional economies. Violence impedes economic productivity, which leads to greater rates of poverty, and states experience increased health expenditure. These impacts deepen the severity of problems caused by disasters, impede recovery and threaten achievement of sustainable development.

SGBV in disasters remains poorly studied in the Pacific. Global evidence clearly shows the links, but further research is needed to document the scope and severity of the problem. Existing evidence and examples are outlined below.

Prevalence (%) and Patterns of Violence against Women (15-49) in Pacific Island Countries<sup>6</sup>



# DISASTER IMPACTS ON SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE PACIFIC

Global research demonstrates the link between disasters and violence, in particular the exacerbating effects disasters have on pre-existing rates of SGBV. The Pacific region, where SGBV rates are already high by global standards, is no exception to this trend. For example, increased rates of SGBV, including rape, were reported in Solomon Islands after the Gizo tsunami in 2007<sup>11</sup>, a disaster that resulted in the displacement of approximately 10,000 people. Women and girls in temporary campsites also reported that the distance to water was too great, that men had begun to wait around water sites, and that they did not feel safe when bathing<sup>12</sup>.

Disasters create conditions that intensify pre-existing SGBV risk factors such as stress and trauma (both of which are drastically heightened following disasters, and both of which reduce normal coping capacities and heighten the risk of violent response to pressure or strain). Additionally, disaster affected people often spend lengthy periods of time in collective or evacuation centres, where living conditions are routinely lower than those people are used to, specifically in terms of private space for couples and families. After two tropical cyclones hit the Western division of Fiji in 2012, for example, women living in relief centres were reportedly being violently forced into sex by their husbands, in spite of their reluctance due to concerns about over-crowding and lack of privacy<sup>13</sup>.

SGBV response is also impeded by cultural factors that discourage reporting, including shame, stigma and a culture of silence. This reluctance to speak out is consistent with results of the Pacific Family Health and Safety Studies, which demonstrate the stigma associated with reporting this type of violence<sup>14</sup>. Additionally, the protection assessment for the 2014 tropical cyclone in Tonga found that stigma around SGBV extended beyond the family to the village level, resulting in a

strong collective disincentive to reporting or referral SGBV issues (this is despite the fact that, in this particular circumstance, there was a lack of stigma attached to the survivor of violence)<sup>15</sup>.

Even where survivors are willing to report violence, the appropriate systems and services are often not in place. Formal SGBV services are largely absent in the Pacific, and where they do exist, resources are overstretched and inadequate to respond to the scale of the problem during disasters. Additionally, referral networks – systems to ensure that essential services for SGBV survivors (including *inter alia* healthcare, counselling, legal/justice and transitional shelter services) communicate with each other, minimising the burden on survivors of violence to contact individual services separately and to retell their story to access each service – are either non-existent or function with limited capacity across the region.

Lack of awareness on the part of humanitarian actors of specific SGBV risk factors can also create conditions which exacerbate hazards for women and girls. For example, practitioners can drastically reduce risks to women and girls by ensuring that toilets and bathrooms in evacuation centres are gender-separated, lockable and supplied with functional lights. Where these standards are not met, as was the case in many of the collective centres in the 2014 Solomon Islands floods, women and children face heightened risks of unwanted sexual contact<sup>16</sup>.

Children also face increased vulnerability to specific forms of sexual violence and abuse during and after disasters. Following the Fiji floods, due to the economic burden placed on families as a result of displacement and loss of assets, assessments established that children were being kept home from school either to care for other young children in the family, or to earn money at night through sex work<sup>17</sup>.



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

As climate change increases the frequency and severity of disasters, the risks and challenges associated with SGBV will also heighten across the region. In addition to the negative impacts on individual women and girls, families and communities, this poses significant challenges to the achievement of future sustainable development. The relationships between these issues are highly relevant for the Pacific region and therefore should be taken into account in the development of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Long-term socio-economic development plans will neither be effective nor sustainable unless they include clear strategies for reducing violence, and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Recommendations for the development of SDGs, and the post-2015 agenda include:

- Acknowledge and address the high rates of SGBV experienced across the Pacific region; the negative impacts of this on communities, individuals, and sustainable development; and the likelihood that these will increase in incidence and severity as climate change impacts become more severe.
- Development of an information system on SGBV before incidences to monitor how they are addressed during and after disasters.

- Improve capacity of national disaster management offices and other humanitarian stakeholders to intervene effectively to prevent violence, as well as protect and rescue victims during and after disasters.
- Build capacity of disaster risk management stakeholders to use gender indicators to improve disaster risk management plans.
- Set targets that address the root causes of the rise in violence likely to occur as a result of climate change impacts. A standalone gender goal must address the underlying contributors to SGBV.
- Include services to prevent SGBV in all disaster risk management plans.
- Build the capacity of all agencies involved in preparedness, response and recovery on SGBV and put in place a coordination mechanism to effectively protect and rescue women and girls from violent situations.
- Support communities to include specific measures to protect women and girls after disasters.
- Support women's economic empowerment by adopting measures to protect their incomes generating activity in case of disasters and to aid a quick recovery.



1 UNFPA, 2013, based on: Fiji: Report forthcoming; Kiribati: [http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_view&gid=211&Itemid=44](http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=211&Itemid=44); Samoa: [http://www.spc.int/hdp/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=41&Itemid=44](http://www.spc.int/hdp/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=41&Itemid=44) and [http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who\\_multicountry\\_study/en/](http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who_multicountry_study/en/); Solomon Islands: [http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_view&gid=44&Itemid=44](http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=44&Itemid=44); Tonga: <http://mfttonga.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/tonga-vaw-report-final-2012.pdf>; Vanuatu: <http://www.usaid.gov.au/countries/pacific/vanuatu/Documents/womens-centre-survey-womens-lives.pdf>

2 Ibid

3 UNFPA, 2013. Presentation to UN agencies.

4 Stop Violence Against Women, 2013. Health Effects of Domestic Violence. Available at: [http://www.stopvaw.org/Health\\_Effects\\_of\\_Domestic\\_Violence](http://www.stopvaw.org/Health_Effects_of_Domestic_Violence)

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7 UNESCAP, 2009. Pacific Perspectives on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse of Children and Youth. Bangkok, Thailand, 2009.

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10 UNFPA, 2013, based on: Kiribati: [http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_view&gid=211&Itemid=44](http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=211&Itemid=44)

11 UN OHCHR, 2011. Protecting the Rights of Internally Displaced Persons in Natural Disasters. Challenges in the Pacific

12 UN Women. The 2012 Fiji Floods: Gender Sensitivity in Disaster Management. Suva, Fiji, 2013.

13 UN Women. The 2012 Fiji Floods: Gender Sensitivity in Disaster Management. Suva, Fiji, 2013.

14 UNFPA, 2013, based on: Fiji: Report forthcoming; Kiribati: [http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_view&gid=211&Itemid=44](http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=211&Itemid=44); Samoa: [http://www.spc.int/hdp/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=41&Itemid=44](http://www.spc.int/hdp/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=41&Itemid=44) and [http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who\\_multicountry\\_study/en/](http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who_multicountry_study/en/); Solomon Islands: [http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_view&gid=44&Itemid=44](http://www.spc.int/hdp/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=44&Itemid=44); Tonga: <http://mfttonga.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/tonga-vaw-report-final-2012.pdf>; Vanuatu: <http://www.usaid.gov.au/countries/pacific/vanuatu/Documents/womens-centre-survey-womens-lives.pdf>

15 <http://reliefweb.int/report/tonga/safety-and-protection-assessment-tc-ian-haapai-tonga-january-february-2014>

16 [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA\\_SLB\\_FlashFloods\\_Sitrep9\\_20140529\\_FINAL.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA_SLB_FlashFloods_Sitrep9_20140529_FINAL.pdf)

17 UN Women. The 2012 Fiji Floods: Gender Sensitivity in Disaster Management. Suva, Fiji, 2013.

Page 1: End Violence against Women banner, Nauru women's safehouse, Nauru, 2013. Credit: UN Women/ Olivia Owen

Page 3 top: Suva market vendors support ending violence against women, Suva, Fiji, 2013. Credit: UN Women/ Saleshni Chaudhary

Page 4: Stop the War on Women and Girls, International Women's Day 2013, Suva, Fiji. Credit: UN Women/ Chloe Chamraud

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