

CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION IN POST-DISASTER RECOVERY - POLICY BRIEF 6

Weathering the Storm: How iTaukei Fijian women experience vulnerability and resilience to disaster

Diverse knowledges, women's experiences, and relational understandings of climate change and natural hazards in Fiji

Cyclone Winston was the most intense tropical cyclone to hit the Southern Hemisphere since records began. Following the devastation of their homes and livelihoods, Fijian communities relied on one another for support and recovery. This policy brief explores the impact of disasters like Cyclone Winston on women, their roles in the community and the implications for climate change policy.

KEY MESSAGES

- Women in Votua and Navala did not perceive themselves as being more vulnerable to natural disasters than men.
- Social networks can reduce women's perceived vulnerabilities by providing support and protection in times of hardship.
- The Church plays a significant role in community recovery and resilience following disasters.
- Women's domestic and informal work is undervalued in comparison to men's work in the formal sector.
- Women's traditional roles within the community create an extra burden during disasters.



Figure 1. Votua floods (Photo: Courtesy of Votua villagers)

CONTEXT

In 2016, Cyclone Winston was the most intense tropical storm to hit the Southern Hemisphere causing devastation, fear and widespread homelessness. A large proportion of Fijians were affected by the cyclone, particularly in Ba province. This research, conducted in the wake of Cyclone Winston, was carried out in Votua and Navala villages, located in the Ba River Catchment Area, an area greatly affected by climate change and natural hazards. This area is primarily reliant on agriculture, fisheries and tourism for subsistence, industries which were impacted severely by Cyclone Winston.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

Background

Global climate change knowledge is often assumed by specialists to be generalisable to a diverse range of communities and contexts.

This study was conducted in order to discover whether this knowledge was relevant in a local Fijian context, or whether local knowledges differed from the global narrative.

Special focus was given to iTaukei women, their perceptions of vulnerability, and the roles they play in preparing for and responding to disasters.

Aims of study

The study aims to understand the knowledge and experiences of iTaukei communities in relation to disasters and climate change. The factors contributing to vulnerability are also explored, recognising the cultural, traditional, political and historical factors that impact communities during disasters.

A key area of the study explores the ways in which gender affects resilience and vulnerability to disasters. To this end, gender relations, family dynamics and livelihood

activities are analysed to determine how resilience differs among community members.

Methodology

The fieldwork was carried out over two weeks. During this time, community-focused workshops were conducted, as well as individualised research in Navala and Votua. Information was gathered from interviews, journals, and participatory mapping. Methods were guided by the principles of *talanoa*, a Pacific research methodology.



Figure 2. Participants of a participatory mapping session in Nawaqarua, Ba district (Photo: A. Neef)

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Western scientific knowledge is the dominant base of global approaches to mitigating climate change and natural disasters. Therefore, most research on climate change resilience and adaptation uses these knowledge bases, resulting in indigenous peoples being framed as inferior, unprepared and vulnerable victims.

Within Fiji, the dominance of Western scientific knowledge has **resulted in a loss of traditional knowledge and indigenous responses to climate change and natural hazards**, impacting people's way of life, food systems and settlement patterns. As a result of colonisation and globalisation, much of what is traditionally thought of as 'indigenous knowledge' has been lost or is no longer thought adequate.

iTaukei Fijians approach disasters through a holistic understanding.

Fijians have often constructed their knowledge of disaster through a combination of traditional, western-scientific, and faith-based knowledges. Many participants drew upon two or all three of these knowledge bases when discussing disasters.



Figure 3. A holistic worldview

Although the loss of traditional knowledge is common within the community, there were some who maintained aspects of traditional indigenous knowledge (see Box 1). This was often used in combination with western-scientific knowledge to reaffirm the oncoming natural hazard event.

Box 1: Traditional Knowledge

Community members demonstrated how traditional knowledge would both increase their preparedness and enhance recovery following disasters.

In particular, planting sweet potato and cassava varieties with different maturing rates meant that community members could rely upon their land for food and income generation three months following a disaster.

Signals in nature have traditionally been used to determine oncoming weather events. For example, the increased presence of the balolo

worm in the ocean signifies the onset of rainy season and potential flooding. Seabirds flying inland, bees nesting on the ground or beneath roofs, plantain leaves pointing to the ground, and breadfruit and orange trees producing excessive amount of fruit have been used to determine the onset of a cyclone.

This quote demonstrates the combination of Western-scientific and traditional knowledge:

“A few days before the hurricane struck, warnings were broadcasted over the radio and television and I even saw signs appear within my surroundings, such as trees which were dying and falling fruits, indicators that were used by our ancestors. When I started seeing these signs, I began my preparations.”

International interventions, based primarily on scientific knowledge have been demonstrated to erode traditional and cultural adaptation strategies. Therefore, **when implementing interventions within Fiji, it is important to adopt a holistic approach**, utilising both indigenous and scientific knowledge to develop adequate adaptation strategies. In order to achieve this, traditional indigenous knowledge must be reclaimed.

ARE WOMEN MORE VULNERABLE TO CLIMATE CHANGE?

‘The Vulnerable Woman’

Globally, it is understood that women are more vulnerable to climate change.

This is believed to be the result of social structures and power relations that disadvantage women. Therefore, government strategies need to focus on reducing inequalities in order to minimise the impact of climate events on women.

- **Many climate adaptation strategies identify women as focal actors** as they are more likely to be in charge of climate-related activities, such as collecting water and subsistence agriculture.
- **It is important to address gender inequality across all sectors** to ensure new policies do not inadvertently increase the burden of climate change on women.
- **Fijian women are less likely to be involved in the creation of climate change policies.** It is important that gender is incorporated into any climate change policy, or wider government policy, and that women's voices are listened to and taken into account.
- **iTaukei women have established strong social networks.** These community networks are tapped into during times of need, such as a disaster. The importance of social networks will be discussed in-depth later in this brief.
- **Some iTaukei women feel empowered by their spirituality and religion.** Faith has been used by iTaukei women as a tool to survive their daily hardships. Many of those affected by Cyclone Winston were aided in their recovery by their local church.

iTaukei Perceptions of Vulnerability

iTaukei Fijian women DO NOT believe that they are more vulnerable to climate change than men.

Because of their roles in subsistence agriculture, *Fijian women are more at risk of experiencing food insecurity in the wake of a natural disaster.* However, many factors influence iTaukei women's perceptions of their vulnerability:

- **Food insecurity was compensated for** by women's indigenous knowledge of planting sustainable crops, and the response of the Fijian Government through the provision of food rations in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Winston.

Box 2: Perceptions of Vulnerability

These quotes illustrate community perceptions of women's vulnerability:

"No groups are more vulnerable before, during or after a disaster. Everyone makes sure everyone else is ok and then the government comes".

"While men and women have different roles, they are affected by disasters equally."

"Men and women are affected the same in disasters, there are no superheroes."

Vulnerable Groups

Vulnerability exists within the iTaukei communities. Many community members identified the elderly, disabled, and those who had lost their homes as the most vulnerable and in need of assistance during times of disaster. This is illustrated in Box 3.

Box 3: Vulnerable Groups

Two women spoke of the vulnerability of elders and people with disabilities. Most often, the burden of caring for these vulnerable people falls onto women.

"...this 85-year old woman who lives with me, her house was destroyed and she had to be carried to the evacuation centre."

"My husband's older brother couldn't walk, so I had to stay back at the house during and after the flood. The school, which was our evacuation centre, was too far and hard to reach with his disability. It was also overcrowded there. People with disabilities are the most affected by disasters".

THE VARYING ROLES OF WOMEN



Figure 4. Woman digging for clams in the Ba River Delta (Photo: A. Neef)

Traditional Roles

Gender roles in Fiji tend to follow traditional lines. Women are more likely to carry out domestic and childcare duties, while men are more likely to work in the formal sector, acting as the ‘breadwinner’ for their family.

“Women stay home. Men farm. Women are only helpers, but everything is the man’s responsibility.”

Much of the work that women do is in the informal sector, such as subsistence agriculture. Because the majority of women’s work is not formally recognised, they rarely qualify for a pension, which can leave women in a precarious economic situation if their husband passes away. This is illustrated in Box 4. The informal nature of women’s work also puts them at more risk of losing their livelihood in the event of a natural disaster.

Box 4: Pensions

One woman was worried about her livelihood if her husband passes away. Her and her husband’s only income is from his government pension. She fears for her ability to survive should her husband die.

The woman is unable to receive a pension of her own because she has never worked formally.

Granting pensions only to those who have worked in the formal sector disadvantages women who have traditionally worked informally doing domestic duties and subsistence farming.

Widows receive a \$50 food voucher and \$30 per month through social welfare, and must find other sources of income in order to survive.

The lack of recognition of women’s unpaid and informal work causes inequality. Rectifying this could go a long way to providing stability and reducing vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters.

Changing Gender Roles

However, the roles of women and men are changing in Fiji. The women of Votua and Navala engage in many activities to contribute to household food security and income.

- Agriculture
- Fishing
- Collecting crabs and clams
- Farming
- Kava harvesting
- Selling produce at markets
- Selling souvenirs to tourists
- Acting as a tour guide for tourists

More and more women are taking on a prominent role in the economic well-being of their family.

“Before we used to carry out roles separately. My wife did the housework while I was working, but now we share the work.”

Many women in Votua and Navala stated that their increased economic role was out of necessity, due to the effects of grogging (kava drinking). The women explained that due to men spending more time grogging, women had to work more in order to provide for their family.

Box 5: Effects of kava drinking on women's roles

These quotes show how women perceive grogging to be influencing their roles.

"Because men drink a lot of grog, it affects the roles that men and women play, with men getting lazier."

"Roles are changing as men do less work, they just sleep, and women take on more jobs. Men stay up late drinking kava."

"In Votua, women earn more than men. The mentality is that men go fishing for cigarettes and kava."

While the gender roles in Fiji appear to be changing, this is due to the increasing involvement in grogging by men, and may increase the burden on women to provide for their families.

Inequality in the formal sector

Changing gender roles are seeing more women employed in the formal sector. This comes with challenges; **many women experience inequality in the formal sector**. Women are often only able to find jobs that are deemed appropriate for them, such as teaching, or are paid less than their male counterparts for their work. This is demonstrated in Box 6.

These inequalities devalue women's work and make it more difficult for them to provide for their family.

Box 6: Women in the Sugar Industry

The sugar industry is an integral part of the Fijian economy, providing many jobs to iTaukei people. Although this industry has traditionally been male-dominated, more and more women are taking up employment cutting sugarcane.

However, while men cutting sugarcane are paid \$12 a day, women are paid only \$10 for the same job.

Inequalities such as this undermine the value of women's work, and serve to discourage women

from seeking work in the formal sector, which can then exclude them from receiving pensions, as was shown in Box 4.

It is important that women's work is valued equally to men's in order to support their involvement in the work they choose to do and provide stability to their families both short-term and long-term.

HOW SOCIAL NETWORKS AFFECT RESILIENCE

Social networks help to manage risk and reduce vulnerability to hazards and insecurity. Strong bonds between community members, and a culture of assisting one another during hard times helps to create a 'safety net'. **A resilient community is a community with strong social networks.**

In the Pacific, informal kinship structures create connections within communities. In Votua and Navala, community members create strong social networks in a number of ways, including:

- Offering food and shelter
- Supporting people experiencing hardship
- Looking out for vulnerable community members

The role of these social networks has begun to be acknowledged in a number of Pacific Island State sustainable development plans, with the aim of encouraging climate-resilient communities. **Community-level social networks should be recognised as a vital coping mechanism that helps create resilient communities.**

Social Networks in Disaster

In times of disaster, these social networks play an especially important role in resilience and recovery. **Social networks often act as the first response, helping those in need in the immediate aftermath of an event.**

Vulnerable community members rely upon social networks for support. During Cyclone Winston, people with mobility issues could not reach evacuation centres independently and often did not have the resources or ability to repair damage sustained to their property, making them particularly vulnerable following the cyclone. These people relied on the social networks around them for support and assistance.

The Role of the Church

Structured networks including church groups play an important role in resilience. The villages of Votua and Navala, like many iTaukei communities, have strong Christian faiths which influence the worldview of community members. Many respondents expressed their belief that God played a role in their experience of Cyclone Winston, either bringing the disaster or keeping communities safe.

“I think climate change was the main cause for disasters to take place so often, to me this reflects the will of God.... When disaster strikes, we would move to higher ground especially during floods, in addition pray for God’s mercy to be upon us all.”

The strength of these beliefs and the role they play in resilience highlight the

importance of incorporating faith-based social networks into disaster management strategies.

THE BURDEN OF DISASTERS

Cyclone Winston created devastating impacts across the affected communities. Crops were lost, buildings and houses were damaged, people displaced and lives disrupted. Not all community members were affected in the same way, and the impact of the disaster was not evenly spread. **The roles of women in the community created an extra burden on them during disasters.**

Women in Disasters

Women have traditionally taken on caregiving roles in the community. As roles have changed, women have taken on even more work.

When a disaster strikes, the roles and responsibilities of women are multiplied. Women take on the burden of preparing for disasters, and supporting their families and households in the aftermath. Women are the ones to look after and support elderly and disabled relatives through social networks.



Figure 5. Votua School during evacuation from flooding. Women are often the ones to assist vulnerable elderly and disabled community members to evacuation centres or to stay behind if the evacuation centres are not accessible (Photo: Courtesy of Votua Community)

Box 7: Women's roles in disasters

Villagers in the communities, both men and women, identified that women played a larger role in the preparations for disasters.

"There is a difference between men and women. Men, they just relax, but women prepare for everything. They prepare utensils and food to take with them. This is because women look after the household, while men say 'just leave everything'."

"Women are more affected (in preparing for) disasters as they worry about the children. It is more stress for women as men just drink kava and forget about it. We men think about how to build houses, not how to feed children."

"Men were not as prepared for Cyclone Winston compared to women. Women prepare all the food and cooking utensils because women naturally focus on households and men focus more on being out in the field."

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Incorporating indigenous knowledge into policies and plans would strengthen the contextual relevance of policy, and encourage iTaukei people to react effectively to the traditional signs of an impending weather event.
- Climate change policies can broaden their impact by including women in the formulation of such policies and by taking women and their experiences into account.
- The formal recognition of women's informal work would contribute to reducing inequalities faced both on a daily basis and during times of disaster.
- In the formal sector, equal pay and equal treatment for women would reduce their vulnerability compared to their male counterparts.
- Recognising the value of social networks and religious organisations in response to disaster can strengthen climate change policy.
- Considering whether climate change policies place greater responsibility on women may reduce the burden of disasters.

This policy brief has been prepared by Caitlin Flannery, Hannah McKnight and Claudia Case, The University of Auckland, New Zealand, and is based on the following material:

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