



2023 WPS Hybrid Workshop Summary: Building Inclusive Resilience in the Pacific

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On July 10 and 11, 2023, civil society leaders and Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) practitioners from across the Pacific Islands gathered virtually and in Suva, Fiji, for a two-day workshop focused on exploring the nexus of gender, climate, and food security. The workshop, titled “Advancing Women, Peace, and Security: Building Inclusive Resilience in the Pacific,” was organized by CNA and sponsored by US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). The event was designed to build bridges between communities of practice implementing policies of inclusivity, disaster resilience, and sustainability. It built upon a virtual conference held in 2020 that sought to identify what security means to Pacific Islanders. This workshop highlighted the perspectives of women leaders to develop regionally informed answers to the following question: *Looking through a gender lens, how do connections between climate change and food access affect security and stability in the Pacific Islands?*

Over the two-day workshop, more than 20 attendees joined in person and another 50 joined via Zoom. Although the agenda included presentations and panels, the focus was on creating an interactive event with space for the voices of attendees. Representatives from USINDOPACOM opened the workshop, highlighting their goals of advancing WPS and improving climate change mitigation by working alongside regional partners and learning from women leaders. The event featured remarks from Adi Vasulevu Merewalesi Levu, executive director of Transcend Oceania, and Fay Volatabu, executive director of femLINKpacific. A facilitated panel discussion highlighted the voices and experiences of women leaders from Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands.

Day one of the workshop featured presentations that were explored further on day two. CNA’s Dr. Casey Steadman delivered a presentation which explored a hypothetical 2025 tropical cyclone season and its potential impacts. The Pacific Disaster Center gave a presentation on its data-driven approach to tracking environmental disasters and presented a live demo of its early warning technologies. Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security, and Conflict Transformation supported the in-person component of this event, which was documented by local photography and videography organizations Boss Communications and Scenic Fiji. Participants were also offered the opportunity to record short videos about their experiences, and femLINKpacific hosted an in-person podcast recording; both efforts helped to amplify the voices of attendees.

Below is a summary of some of the key takeaways and findings from the two-day workshop.

The Concept of *Vanua*

The opening keynote speaker, Adi Vasulevu Merewalesi Levu, introduced the concept of *vanua*, a Fijian term that translates literally to “ocean and the land.” It reflects a communal sentiment that means “what affects one affects another.” Speakers on the panel and participants returned to this concept repeatedly during the workshop. *Vanua* can also describe the ways that disparate issues, such as climate change and women’s empowerment, relate and intersect. For example, increased economic empowerment helps to improve women’s standing in society, which in turn might reduce gender-based violence (GBV); however, women cannot access markets to sell goods if it is unsafe to walk to them. Another example of this concept

of *vanua* and interconnection was participants' repeated references to the importance of men and boys. For example, they asserted that in discussions on gender or women's empowerment, the role of men cannot be overlooked because their behavior is key to societal change and because men, youth, and gender-nonconforming individuals also benefit from gender equality and safer communities.

Culturally Specific Nuances

Participants discussed the need to broaden definitions of empowerment and security multiple times during the workshop, harkening to the focus of the first 2020 workshop. Although the traditional definition of security is expanding to include issues such as climate security, the definition of climate security itself is contested. The definition of security depends on one's role, experiences, and focus, and it is important to continue to bring non-traditional and feminist security approaches into the conversation. One participant noted that, as with security, the definition of peace can also vary significantly. It might mean one thing for a government, but for a girl it might be food on her family's table or the ability to go to school. The participant added that a government can work toward a happy, stable society by starting with individuals and their needs. Peacebuilding organizations at the workshop included Transcend Oceania and the Pacific Center for Peacebuilding.

Many participants emphasized that the Pacific Islands are not homogenous—there is significant diversity both between and within the islands. Papua New Guinea, for example, encompasses 800 languages and over 600 cultures. The challenges presented by climate change can vary depending on a community's infrastructure, whether it is rural or urban, and its major food sources (e.g., fishing versus agriculture). Finally, layers exist within individuals' identities. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to climate change, and context is key to understanding the link between climate change, food access, gender security, and regional stability.

Gender-Based Violence

GBV remains a significant challenge. Women alone cannot solve this issue; men, boys, and youth play a key role in addressing GBV and women's empowerment more broadly. Attendees shared that engaging with men on these issues has historically led to some pushback, but training and technology are important tools that can help change perspectives. Education should be provided about the societal costs of violence against women, while women need education about the laws that protect them and resources they can access for help. Participants noted that although police are not the only resource for women, police still need training to respond better to and engage with victims of GBV. Participants noted that their countries' focus is more on response than prevention, and that training in prevention and victim services would be beneficial.

CNA's scenario during the workshop highlighted that following a crisis or natural disaster, GBV often increases significantly, a finding that was reinforced by participants' experiences. Unstable income, shifting household roles, and pressure to meet a family's needs are all stressors that can make GBV more likely. One proposed solution was the use of the military or navy. In many countries, the military already helps with recovery and search and rescue post-disaster. The military could also help to secure regions where police presence is light or violence against women is high. Technology and media could also be a tool to ensure that GBV remains visible after a crisis.

Food Security

As described by one participant, "Women are synonymous with food." In Vanuatu, 80 percent of women are engaged in local agriculture. Despite the challenges presented by a changing climate, the expectations for women remain the same; in most circumstances they are still expected to put food on their family's table. Increased food prices caused by climate change or natural disasters are a matter not just of food security but physical safety. Disruption to household routines around food or the process of securing food post-

disaster can threaten the safety of women and girls. Women play a central role as indigenous knowledge holders of food cultivation, preparation, and preservation techniques. Encouraging the use of these practices and equipping more women and youth with indigenous knowledge could help mitigate food security concerns.

Education, Training, and Indigenous Knowledge

Women in the Pacific Islands already possess the skills, the knowledge, and the experience needed to support women in their communities, enact positive change, and build climate resilience. During the workshop, participants expressed the desire to receive training from external partners that will help them better utilize their existing skills. As one participant stated: “We want to acquire tools to do this work and change mindsets of the people.” In addition to receiving training, individuals expressed interest in *providing* trainings to their governments and other organizations about climate security and WPS issues. Participants also emphasized the importance of supporting women in their communities with training and education. Issues that came up multiple times included financial literacy, business development, and more general “life skills.” A final area where education may be needed is about climate change itself.

Although additional education and training would be beneficial, participants were clear that it should not supplant indigenous knowledge. There is a desire to preserve traditional knowledge on everything from land cultivation to medicine development in institutions. As one speaker noted, “Without structural support, indigenous knowledge will disappear.” Attendees also noted that indigenous culture needs to be promoted with local youth, who are also vulnerable to the disruption caused by climate change.

Collaboration, Communication, and Information-Sharing

Another theme that emerged was the importance of collaboration and coordination across communities, organizations, and countries, which is necessary to avoid duplicating efforts. There has been an absence of collaboration between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing financial incentives related to climate change and disaster management. Attendees critiqued how incentives are offered, arguing that money rarely makes it to the most vulnerable populations. Participants also noted that civil society organizations and NGOs need to identify potential collaboration points across their organizations’ missions and projects and provide each other with support and mentoring where applicable.

Media, information, and communication technologies were presented as valuable tools that can connect communities and enact positive social change. Participants proposed creating communication hubs where rural women can receive the same information as urban women or women with access to mobile phones. It was also stressed that women need to document their experiences and, in turn, communicate these stories to broader audiences to help spread awareness about the impacts of climate change, GBV, and food insecurity. Various organizations present at the workshop were focused on providing information to NGOs, women, and vulnerable communities. Through radio programs and the real-time Women’s Weather Watch, femLINKpacific aims to create local alternatives to mainstream broadcasting.¹ The Pacific Disaster Center is also focused on providing individuals with access to real-time information on climate disasters and hazards, as well as metrics on issues such as coping capacity and WPS.

Economic Empowerment

Women remain a vulnerable population in many Pacific Island societies. One way to change this is through economic empowerment, which is closely related to social empowerment. Economic empowerment improves women’s capacity to provide for their families, their resilience to environmental disasters, and their preparation for climate change’s impacts. As powerfully stated by Fay Volatabu in her closing remarks, “A woman’s best protection is a little money of her own.” Unfortunately, there is still a lack of

¹ Learn more about femLINKpacific, their programs, and Women’s Weather Watch at the organization’s website: <https://www.femlinkpacific.org.fj>.

economic opportunities and formal job markets for women, especially in rural and maritime communities. Although Fiji hosts a market day for women to sell their products, it takes place once a year. A more sustainable model that supports women's economic empowerment year-round is needed. Developing partnerships with the private sector was one solution proposed to help accomplish this goal.

Disaster Response

A significant portion of the workshop was dedicated to a discussion of disaster response. In its presentation, the Pacific Disaster Center (PDC) highlighted that three of the countries most at risk to the impacts of climate change and related environmental disasters, as measured by its 2050 Global Impact Climate Change Analysis, are Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. PDC's demo of its early warning system, DisasterAWARE, generated interest among attendees; many signed up for the technology during the presentation.²

The importance of including women in disaster planning was also emphasized by multiple participants. Most logistic managers who help coordinate response and recovery are male, and logistic planning is done with "a male perspective" that can overlook the needs of women and families. Other marginalized communities, such as LGBT+ individuals or persons with disabilities (audio, visual, or physical), can also be overlooked in disaster assistance and planning. Women can often be more in tune with their communities than men and are able to identify gaps and needs quickly and should be more involved in both pre-disaster planning and post-disaster recovery.

The Role of Government

A whole of society and whole of government approach is needed to address the significant challenges posed by climate change. The relationship is bidirectional; stronger strategies and plans for action at the national level will trickle down and help women on the ground, while grassroots movements can—and should—influence national policies. Government backing, including both funding and policies, is critical to support the education of girls and women on a national scale.

Participants noted that, historically, there has been a lack of collaboration between civil society organizations and the government in the Pacific Islands, but that has started to change following recent typhoons and other natural disasters. It is important for NGOs and CSOs to understand their government's national visions around climate change and disaster resilience to take advantage of synergies when possible. In some countries, such as Papua New Guinea and Fiji, the national Council of Social Services plays a key role in preparing for disasters and is increasingly partnering on women's safety and development.

A final takeaway was the focus of governments. Although governments are focused on high-level issues, such as achieving the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, it is important not to lose sight of the experiences of citizens, including women who are working hard just to get food on the table. The micro and macro need to be connected. Although existing declarations and policies on gender equality and climate action are good steps forward, it is important to ensure that implementation of these policies comes to fruition to ensure actual progress.

Recommendations from Participants

Throughout the workshop, the attendees and speakers pointed to best practices and recommendations for strengthening cooperation on climate security in the region. The below recommendations are particularly

² Learn more about the Pacific Disaster Center at their website: <https://www.pdc.org/>. You can request access to PDC's early warning systems Disaster Alert (available to the public) or DisasterAWARE Pro (available only to emergency management practitioners and the humanitarian community) at <https://www.pdc.org/disasteraware>.

relevant for efforts to determine how the US government and USINDOPACOM can engage more effectively and sensitively in the region:

- Support the development among stakeholders of a contact network for civil society organizations (CSOs): This social network would be used to connect CSOs and regional leaders with one another, and with local governments to foster military-government-civil society collaboration to increase all parties' awareness of ongoing initiatives and avoid working in silos. This network of contacts could bridge the gap noted between government and civil society in many Pacific Island nations. This could be beneficial for both INDOPACOM as well as the partner nations governments and civil society, enabling them to engage and share updates more regularly and foster more efficient collaboration on interconnected WPS and climate security goals. INDOPACOM Office of WPS conducts frequent engagements and trainings throughout the region and being able to share progress and notices on the programs with a sustained network of regional, local civil society and government experts can help raise awareness of and support for the initiatives. Providing follow-ups, status updates, or after-action notices to the network could further maintain interest and energy for ongoing initiatives.
- Include non-traditional partners: Participants encouraged nontraditional thinking about partners and planners, suggesting that it would be useful to identify local groups that should be involved in planning and logistics (e.g., churches, other religious organization, activist groups), ones that are already active in community planning and training, since different groups have access to different members and components of the community. In addition, it is crucial to think about people and organizations to identify for participation in trainings and workshops, especially those who may not traditionally be involved in disaster relief or resilience planning.
- Address needs and provide tools specifically for rural communities: Rural communities in the Pacific Islands, and specifically women in those communities, can be extremely isolated and cut off from government level participation, as a few participants explained throughout the workshop. As a result, it was recommended that when select women from more isolated regions in the Pacific are invited to participate in trainings or programs hosted by INDOPACOM Office of WPS at the regional or government level, they should be given explicit tools and plans to take back to their communities to share all the knowledge and tools learned. This also serves as an additional follow-up that can increase awareness and interest in INDOPACOM WPS Initiatives, offering a supportive method through which to share information with the remote communities who are often in greatest need of assistance and tools.

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