

Can the Pacific Island Countries Lead the Way on Merging the WPS Agenda and Climate Security?

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Introduction

Highly exposed to climate change risks, Pacific Island Countries (PICs), are leading the way in merging the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda with climate security. The recent Pacific Islands Forum held in December 2023 unveiled the region's most gender-inclusive implementation plan, recognising womens' intersectionality and role in peacebuilding. However, implementation faces major hurdles that have time-and-again kept action on WPS agenda in a state of suspension. For the WPS agenda and climate security to be mainstreamed successfully in the Pacific, core inequalities pervasive in the daily lives of women and girls in the region need to be urgently addressed.

The region is familiar with the WPS agenda, having developed the first regional WPS Action Plan in the Asia-Pacific. It is also deeply concerned with climate security, as a region that is mostly ocean, or a "Blue Continent" struck by sea level rise, high seas hazards, cyclones and other natural disasters.

This paper examines how PICs are mainstreaming the WPS agenda and climate security at regional and national levels. The region is incredibly diverse. Uplifting and mainstreaming gender equality and women's human rights remains a challenge

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across the region. Using the example of the Cook Islands, a large ocean state and one of only two countries in the Pacific classified as high income, we begin to see how core inequalities can keep these climate-vulnerable nations from meeting regional commitments on women and climate security.

The Pacific Island Region: A Leader in Mainstreaming the WPS Agenda and Climate Security

The Pacific Islands Countries (PICs) are a diverse group of independent and self-governing small island developing states stretched out across the Pacific Ocean. The region spans over 40 million square kilometres of ocean, and only 500,000 square kilometres of land, from Palau in the North West Pacific to French Polynesia in the East.¹ Their total population combined is estimated at over 9 million people. The combination of populations packed in to small land areas, scattered across a large oceanscape increases Pacific peoples' exposure to climate change risks. Small economies, poor basic infrastructure, and high cost of travel leave few adaptation options.²

The island states make up the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the region's top political body. The PIF also includes Australia and New Zealand as full members, however these two developed countries are in reality more development partners to the region. The PIF make regional declarations and work with regional and multinational organisations to address development in the region.

The region is considered largely peaceful, although civil war has occurred in Papua New Guinea with the now Autonomous Region of Bougainville, civil unrest in the Solomon Islands (called "The Tensions"), coup in Fiji and rioting in Vanuatu and Tonga.³ In both Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands unrest, women played a critical role in peace brokering and peace building.⁴ In the Autonomous Region of Bougainville women hold custodial land rights and clans are matrilineal. The women of this region were actively involved in brokering peace and effective security during the civil war, and later in reconciliation.⁵

In part because of these experiences, the Pacific region developed the first regional WPS action plan in the Asia-Pacific, the Pacific Women, Peace and Security Regional Action Plan 2012-2015.⁶ A key component of the document was its acknowledgment of the impacts climate change could have on Pacific women and girls' security. It recognised that climate change will exasperate humanitarian crises in some Pacific communities with the threat of sea level rise and the increased occurrence and severity of cyclones and drought, and how these and other impacts of climate change can potentially result in forced displacement, opening up vulnerabilities to sexual and gender-based violence.⁷

¹ Juswanto, Wawan and Zulfiqar Ali. *Economic Growth and Sustainable Development in the Pacific Island Countries*. (Tokyo: ADB Institute, 2016), Policy Brief, No. 2016-6, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/219266/adbi-pb2016-6.pdf>

² Utz, Robert (ed.). *Archipelagic Economies: Spatial Economic Development in the Pacific – Synthesis Report*. (New York: The World Bank, 2021), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/e6ad5929-f1e8-5c09-9760-ffed164417a6/content>

³ "Bougainville: the conflict in focus", Conciliation Resources, accessed January 21, 2024, <https://www.c-r.org/programme/pacific/bougainville-conflict-focus>; "The Tensions", Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), accessed January 21, 2024, <https://www.ramsi.org/the-tensions/>; Ride, Anouk, *Riots in the Pacific: Control and Change*, (Canberra, Australia: Australia Pacific Security College, November 21, 2022), Discussion Paper, https://pacificsecurity.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/v3-Riots_Pacific_Final-Design-.pdf

⁴ Bhagwan Rolls, Sharon and Heather Wrathall, "Women on the frontlines of Pacific peacebuilding", *Australian Outlook*, July 6, 2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/women-on-the-frontlines-of-pacific-peacebuilding/>

⁵ Reddy, Peter, "Reconciliation in Bougainville: Civil War, peacekeeping and restorative justice", *Contemporary Justice Review* Vol. 11, No. 2, (2008): 117-130, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580802057744>

⁶ UN Women, *Asia-Pacific Regional Symposium: National action plans on women, peace and security*. (Bangkok, Thailand: UN Women Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, 2016), p 76, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2016/12/3-Un-Women-Nap-Report-Online.pdf>

⁷ Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). *Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2012-2015*, (Suva, Fiji: PIF, 2012), p 7, <https://www.peacewomen.org/peacewomen.org/rap-pacific>

Since then, the 2018 Boe Declaration of the PIF identified climate change as the top security threat to the Pacific.⁸ This acknowledgement now permeates regional documents such as the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.⁹

The recently released 2050 Strategy Implementation Plan addresses climate security and the role women have in peace and security in the Pacific. In its action statements for peace and security it calls on the region to ensure “the full, equal, effective and meaningful participation of women and girls in all their diversity¹⁰ at every stage of peace processes, conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding”.¹¹ The Revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration also recognises climate change as a major security threat, disproportionately affecting women and girls “in all their diversity”. It commits leaders to the inclusion of women and girls in climate security and processes for peace and security. It further requests leaders to include women and girls in climate change action, including access to climate finance, disaster risk management, and the protection of persons affected by climate change-induced sea level rise.¹²

The 2023 Pacific Climate Security Assessment Guide, meant to operationalise the Boe Declaration, is explicit in the link between climate change impacts and increased insecurity for women, those dependent on them and other vulnerable groups.¹³ The guide provides pathways to mainstream climate security and identifies and articulates the impacts climate change has on national and regional security landscapes.¹⁴ It also highlights the absence of women in leadership positions, stating that only three of 18 PIF Member countries have women in disaster response management roles,¹⁵ and that women in business and government sectors are disproportionately affected by climate change.¹⁶ A high proportion of women in the Pacific work and own businesses in cultural industries and small-scale agriculture and fisheries. These industries are highly dependent on environment biodiversity and heavily impacted by natural hazards and disasters, further intensified by climate change.¹⁷

Major Barriers to Mainstreaming

Despite the high-level progress, basic inequities, compounded by lack of resourcing and action, remain barriers to mainstreaming climate security and the WPS Agenda in the Pacific. Gender inequality and social norms that discriminate against women are prominent across the Pacific. Rates of domestic violence (DV) and violence against women (VAW) are some of the highest in the world, with some PICs at between 60-70% of ever partnered¹⁸ women experiencing intimate

⁸ PIF. *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*. (PIF, 2018), <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>

⁹ PIF, *The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. (PIF, 2022), p 6. <https://www.forumsec.org/2050strategy/>

¹⁰ The statement “Women and girls in all their diversity” in the 2050 Strategy Implementation Plan and Revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration is taken from the 14th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women and 7th Meeting of Pacific Ministers for Women, where it was defined as “all groups and age groups of Pacific women, including indigenous women, elderly women, girls, women living with disabilities, lesbian and bisexual women, urban poor women, women in rural and maritime areas, and women on the climate frontline”. The Outcomes and Recommendations document from the Conference that includes the definition can be found here: <https://www.spc.int/sites/default/files/documents/14th%20Triennial%20Conference%20of%20Pacific%20Women%20Eng.pdf>

¹¹ PIF. *Strategy Implementation Plan 2023-2030*. (PIF, 2023), p 22, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Annex-A-2050-Strategy-Implementation-Plan-2023-2030.pdf>

¹² PIF. *Revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration*. (PIF, 2023), <https://forumsec.org/publications/revitalised-pacific-leaders-gender-equality-declaration>

¹³ PIF. *Pacific Climate Security Assessment Guide*. (PIF, 2023), p 21, https://weatheringrisk.org/sites/default/files/document/Pacific_Climate_Security_Assessment_Guide_webversion.pdf

¹⁴ *Ibid* p 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid* p 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid* p 17.

¹⁷ Pacific Community (SPC), *Women’s Economic Empowerment in the Pacific*, (Noumea, New Caledonia: 2017), <https://www.spc.int/sites/default/files/wordpresscontent/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Overview-Pacific-Womens-Economic-Empowerment-SPC2.pdf>

¹⁸ “Ever-partnered” is defined as “women in a given population who have ever experienced physical and or/sexual violence by an intimate partner”, reference found in “Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15-49 years subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months”, The Global Health Observatory, World Health Organisation, accessed April 22, 2024, <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/proportion-of-ever-partnered-women-and-girls-aged-15-49-years-subjected-to-physical-and-or-sexual-violence-by-a-current-or-former-intimate-partner-in-the-previous-12-months>

partner violence in their lifetimes.¹⁹ Social and cultural norms and attitudes in the Pacific around the acceptability of DV and VAW are pervasive. Across the PICs, beliefs around women’s subordination to men are entrenched. These norms in turn disincentivise those who have or are experiencing DV and VAW to seek help.²⁰ Existing underlying factors for insecurity, such as geography, natural disasters, racial discrimination and gender inequality are exasperated by climate change, in turn increasing risks for domestic violence.²¹ Political participation remains extremely low, with the proportion of women parliamentarians in most countries around 10%.²² Without adequate representation, opportunities to address structural inequalities and participate in political debate and decision-making around issues impacting women in the Pacific, including climate change, is severely diminished.²³ Without adequate representation, there is also the risk that responses to natural disasters become militarised and ‘techno-centric’, ignoring women’s and girls’ needs and realities.²⁴ Most PICs give women the constitutional right to political participation, however patriarchal norms and beliefs about leadership and institutional systems are a barrier to access. For example, in some countries candidacy and parliamentary seats can only be accessed by those with traditional titles, titles that can only be held by males or where an overwhelming majority are men.²⁵ Domestic funding for gender mainstreaming and promoting women’s human rights is near non-existent, and capacity is seriously lacking.²⁶ Across the region, less than 0.1% of national budgets are allocated to women’s departments or divisions and there is little awareness and understanding among civil servants on gender equality and gender mainstreaming. Barriers to gaining capacity are common across PICs, there is high staff turnover, low staff numbers, lack of interest and limited professional development. In some countries this is compounded by beliefs that gender inequality is not an issue. In Samoa, government staff reported that gender mainstreaming capacity was not an issue as Samoan culture itself recognises gender equality, however it was not articulated how these cultural values reflect or relate to international norms around gender equality.²⁷

In the Pacific, only the Autonomous Region of Bougainville and the Solomon Islands have ever developed national action plans to mainstream the WPS agenda.²⁸ These action plans have not been renewed. The Bougainville NAP was not adequately funded and its outcomes not clearly articulated to better measure its success,²⁹ and the revision

¹⁹ SPC. *Thematic brief – Ending violence against women in the Pacific*, (SPC, 2023), https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/acf42df5-54c0-43e2-98c4-e2afeb1bce0/resource/4cf275c7-ea06-419f-845e-7b49cff21e96/download/spc-pwl_thematicbrief_evawg.pdf

²⁰ Ibid p 8.

²¹ UN Environment Programme, UN Women, UNDP and UNDP/PA/PSO. *Gender, Climate & Security: Sustaining inclusive peace on the frontlines of climate change*, (2023), p 36-37. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Gender-climate-and-security-en.pdf> ; Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D), *What does it look like for Australia to be a strategic partner on women, peace and security in the Pacific*, (Canberra, Australia: Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, 2023), Options Paper, p 7, <https://asiapacific4d.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/WPS-in-the-Pacific-web.pdf>; Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), *A GPPAC Pacific Women, Peace and Security Report: Communicating an Inclusive Peace, Development and Humanitarian Nexus for the Pacific Region*, (The Hague: GPPAC, 2020), p 15. https://www.gppac.net/files/2020-02/GPPAC%20Pacific%20WPS2020%20And%20She%20Persisted_Redesign%20the%20Table%20AdvanceCopy.pdf

²² “Governance and Participation in Public Life”, UN Women, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/fiji/womens-political-empowerment-and-leadership>

²³ Baker, Kerryn. “Great Expectations: Gender and Political Representation in the Pacific Islands”. In *Government and Opposition*, 53, Issue 3 (2017):542-568. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/great-expectations-gender-and-political-representation-in-the-pacific-islands/9B0466209F67F0336F573149B7A120F2>

²⁴ Bhagwan Rolls, Sharon, Alisia Evans, *Feminist Peace and Security in Pacific Islands*, (2020), p 17-18, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621056/dp-feminist-peace-security-pacific-islands-210920-en.pdf>

²⁵ Baker, Kerryn. “Chapter 1. Women, Politics, and Representation in the Pacific Islands”. In *Pacific Women in Politics: Gender Quota Campaigns in the Pacific Islands* edited by Brij V. Lal and Jack Corbett, 1-24 (2019). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

²⁶ SPC. *Stocktake of the capacity of governments to mainstream gender across policies, programmes and services: Key findings from 15 Pacific Island countries and territories*. (SPC, 2016). https://hrsd.spc.int/sites/default/files/2021-07/Summary_Gender_Stocktake_Findings.pdf ; SPC. *Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women’s Human Rights 2018-2030*. (Noumea: SPC, 2018), p 7. <https://www.spc.int/sites/default/files/wordpresscontent/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PPA-2018-Part-I-EN2.pdf>

²⁷ SPC, *Stocktake of Gender Mainstreaming Capacity of Pacific Island Governments Samoa*, (SPC, 2015), p 32, <https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/pwl-stocktake-of-gender-mainstreaming-in-samoa>

²⁸ Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG), *Policy for Women’s Empowerment, Gender Equality, Peace and Security*, (Buka Town, Autonomous Region of Bougainville: 2016). <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Bougainville-Gender-Equality-Peace-and-Security-policy-2016.pdf> ; Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, *Solomon Islands Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan 2017-2021*, (Honiara, Solomon Islands: 2017), <https://wpsfocalpointsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Solomon-Islands-2017-2021.pdf>

²⁹ George, Nicole. *Bougainville, Papua New Guinea: Gender and Participation in the wake of a partially “gendered” peace agreement*, (Melbourne, Australia: Monash Gender Peace and Security, 2018). <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:69d5ed8>

of the Solomon Islands NAP is still due, a consultant position was advertised in early 2023.³⁰ The Pacific Women, Peace and Security Regional Action Plan 2012-2015, developed following the 10th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2010, was also not renewed. UN and regional organisations provided ample resourcing for the plan to become a reality.³¹ However after it was released, it was not adequately funded and its goals were not met.³² Work had begun on renewing the plan following the 2019 Pacific Summit on Women, Peace and Security, however compounding disasters, including the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupted progress.³³ One of the plan's key focus areas was to ensure mainstreaming of the WPS agenda in to national security architectures.³⁴ Of PICs current national security policies, only the Solomon Islands Government's National Security Strategy 2020 includes both climate security and the explicit inclusion of women in peace building in its strategic actions.³⁵ The Cook Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Vanuatu have mainstreamed gender-based domestic violence as a human security threat and climate change as a national security threat in their national policies. However, these policies do not include women as key peace monitors or peace builders in their own right, merely victims to security threats.³⁶ This is not surprising given that women's vulnerability is overemphasised globally in both national security and climate security literature,³⁷ and national security institutions and organisations are highly masculinised, including in the Pacific.³⁸ A key outcome of the 2019 Pacific Summit on WPS included preparation of a guidance note by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat on mainstreaming the WPS agenda in to national security policy, however this did not eventuate.³⁹ In addition, national security policies need to explicitly recognise the intersecting factors that discriminate women and girls in the Pacific and limit their empowerment, and take steps to address those to effectively mainstream the WPS agenda and climate security. Women and girls in the Pacific are disproportionately affected by existing insecurities that intersect and are compounded by climate change, such as gender inequality, discrimination based on ethnicity, location, disability, the impacts of natural disasters and limited access to food and water, amongst others. As with gender mainstreaming, high-level declarations and plans in the Pacific attempt to recognise women and girls' intersectionality, by categorising some of the identities, demographic groupings, statuses, and geographic locations of women and girls.⁴⁰ However this has not trickled down, there is a general lack of attention to, and therefore understanding of, intersectionality at the country level. In a study of policy attitudes toward gender in Papua New Guinea's health sector, the researchers revealed a lack of inclusivity in the way that gender is represented in policies, despite government promises and the multitude of ways women's lives in such a diverse country intersect with

³⁰ "Consultant for the Review of the Women Peace and Security National Action Plan", Job Description, Devex, last modified February 3, 2023. <https://www.devex.com/jobs/consultant-for-the-review-of-the-women-peace-and-security-national-action-plan-1080809>

³¹ femLINKPACIFIC, "Way Forward for Regional Action Plan on Women/Peace/Security", *Scoop*, September 14, 2011, <https://m.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO1109/S00292/way-forward-for-regional-action-plan-on-women-peace-security.htm>

³² GPPAC, "The power of connecting local, regional and global levels of action: The story of the Pacific Women Mediators Network", *GPPAC News*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.gppac.net/news/power-connecting-local-regional-and-global-levels-action-story-pacific-women-mediators-network>

³³ AP4D, *What does it look like for Australia to be a strategic partner on women, peace and security in the Pacific*, (2023), p 9; Women, Peace and Security Summit, *Summit Report*. (Apia, Samoa: Women, Peace & Security Summit, 2019), p 4, <https://www.defence.govt.nz/assets/publication/file/4d2a38f594/WPS-Summit-Report-2019.pdf>

³⁴ PIF. *Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2012-2015*, (PIF, 2012), p 18. <https://www.peacewomen.org/peacewomen.org/rap-pacific>

³⁵ Solomon Islands Government. *Solomon Islands National Security Strategy*, (Solomon Islands Government, 2020), <https://pacificsecurity.net/resource/solomons-national-security-strategy/>

³⁶ Cook Islands Government. *Cook Islands National Security Policy 2023-2026*, (Rarotonga, Cook Islands: Cook Islands Government, 2023), <https://pacificsecurity.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/APSC-Cook-Islands-National-Security-Policy-2023-2026-1.pdf>; Republic of Palau Office of the President. *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Palau*, (Ngerulmud, Republic of Palau: 2022), <https://pitiviti.org/storage/dm/2022/08/rop-2022-national-security-strategy-20220813191012624.pdf>; Government of Papua New Guinea. *Papua New Guinea National Security Policy*, (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea: Government of Papua New Guinea, 2013) <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/2013-PNG-National-Security-Policy.pdf>; Government of Samoa. *2018 Samoa National Security Policy*, (Apia, Samoa: Government of Samoa, 2018), <https://pacificsecurity.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2018-Samoa-National-Security-Policy-2018.pdf>; Government of Vanuatu. *Vanuatu National Security Strategy*, (Port Vila, Vanuatu: Government of Vanuatu, 2021), https://www.gov.vu/images/publications/Vanuatu_National_Security_Strategy.pdf

³⁷ Arora-Jonsson, Seema. 2011. "Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change". In *Global Environmental Change*, 21: 744-751. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378011000069>

³⁸ AP4D, *What does it look like for Australia to be a strategic partner on women, peace and security in the Pacific*, p 7.

³⁹ Women, Peace and Security Summit, *Summit Report*, p 4.

⁴⁰ See Outcomes and Recommendations document 14th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women and 7th Meeting of Pacific Ministers for Women, p 1: <https://www.spc.int/sites/default/files/documents/14th%20Triennial%20Conference%20of%20Pacific%20Women%20Eng.pdf>

other factors such as economic status, local culture, health status, age and location.⁴¹ There is also a need for more baseline research on women's intersectionality and its link with climate change and conflict in the region. A review of scholarship on climate change and security in the Pacific found that very little consider gender, and those that do were identified as "adding women", rather than any critical analyses of the ways gender and intersectionality are impacted by climate change.⁴²

Women and Climate Security in the Cook Islands

The Cook Islands, located in the South Pacific between Samoa and French Polynesia, is a "large ocean state".⁴³ Its exclusive economic zone is 550,000 times larger than its total land mass, which is scattered throughout that zone as atoll, semi-atoll and raised coral islands. The main island of Rarotonga, the political and economic centre of the country, is the only mountainous island. Unsurprisingly, the country is highly vulnerable to climate impacts, such as drought, sea level rise, increasingly intense cyclones and water salinisation.⁴⁴ It has also seen few conflicts in modern times.

The Cook Islands security policy framework is focused on human security, and threats from climate change are central to national security efforts. The Cook Islands National Security Policy (NSP) frames the threat of climate change as existential.⁴⁵ Its action plan states:

- strengthen mitigation and adaptation activities to enable the Cook Islands to respond effectively to current and future security challenges of climate change
- protect sovereign rights over maritime areas under international law, particularly from the threat of sea level rise
- strengthen resilience to the effects of natural disasters through professional assessments and effective protection, response and recovery measures.⁴⁶

Nowhere does it mention women and girls' particular needs in climate disaster and their role as frontline responders to climate change impacts. In the Pacific, rising sea levels and more frequent natural disasters are impacting areas traditionally allocated as women's spaces, such as fresh water sources or homes and food gardens, or lands traditionally owned by women.⁴⁷ There are also social and economic barriers to women migrating from their islands when homes are no longer liveable, such as roles in caregiving and subsistence living. Women are forced to adapt to the changing climate, especially for food security and caring for families.⁴⁸ In Pukapuka, an atoll island in the northern Cook Islands, the taro root vegetable is a food crop grown only by women. Rising sea-levels due to climate change have caused saltwater intrusion in to taro plantations, women have had to move crops to smaller spaces elsewhere or invest in

⁴¹ Lamprell, Gina and Jefferey Braithwaite. "Mainstreaming gender and promoting intersectionality in Papua New Guinea's health policy: a triangulated analysis applying data-mining and content analytic techniques." *International Journal for Equity in Health*, Vol. 16, No. 65 (2017). <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12939-017-0555-5>

⁴² Howard, Elise. "Linking gender, climate change and security in the Pacific Islands Region: A systematic review". *Ambio*, 52:518-533 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-022-01813-0>

⁴³ Cook Islands Government. *Statement of Strategic Intentions 2019-2024*. (Cook Islands Government, 2019) https://www.cookislands.gov.ck/images/MFEM_Documents/CEO_Docs-from23Aug16/Press_release_Other_Agencies_MFAI_SoSI_FINAL_06.08.19.pdf

⁴⁴ Government of the Cook Islands. *Third National Communication under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, (Cook Islands Government, 2019). <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/TNC%20FINAL.%20online.pdf>

⁴⁵ Cook Islands Government. *Cook Islands National Security Policy 2023-2026*, p. 31.

⁴⁶ *Ibid* p 32.

⁴⁷ Pascoe, Sophie, "Sailing the waves on our own: Climate change migration, self-determination and the Carteret Islands", *QUT Law Review*, 15, no 2 (2015): 72-85, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/qutlj15&i=250> ; Singh, Priyatma, Tammy Tabe, Tess Martin. "The role of women in community resilience to climate change: A case study of an Indigenous Fijian community". In *Women's Studies International Forum* 90, (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2021.102550>

⁴⁸ Clissold, Rachel, Ross Westoby, Karen E. McNamara. "Women as recovery enablers in the face of disasters in Vanuatu", *Geoforum*, (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum> ; Milan, Andrea, Robert Oakes and Jillian Campbell, *Tuvalu: Climate change and migration – Relationships between household vulnerability, human mobility and climate change*, Report No. 18. (Bonn: United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security, November, 2016), http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/unu:5856/Online_No_18_Tuvalu_Report_161207_.pdf

saltwater-adapting varieties.⁴⁹ The NSP does identify domestic violence as a human security threat, under “Personal Security”. However its plan to address this threat is weak, suggesting only to “address personal security challenges arising from domestic violence.”⁵⁰ It makes no mention of the disproportionate harm domestic violence has on women and girls, nor how this is exasperated in times of natural disaster, which set to increase or intensify due to climate change. As with the rest of the region, high-level statements are made on the Cook Islands government’s commitment to gender equality and ending violence against women,⁵¹ however there is a lack of implementation and budgetary support to policies and departments that are essential for gender mainstreaming. The Gender and Development Division of the Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, who had two staff and their own office within the Ministry, was demoted to a single full-time position under a Director responsible for all social issues, including disability and youth.⁵² This position remains unfilled. In 2023, the Cook Islands government approved an application to use an Australia non-ODA fund to provide budget support to the only women’s counselling centre in the Cook Islands, along with other civil society organisations committed to gender equality.⁵³ This has ensured their continuity in addressing gender-based violence, particularly on the main island of Rarotonga, however this is only for a limited term.

Traditional knowledge in the Pacific is increasingly being recognised as an important factor in resilience to natural disasters and climate change adaptation.⁵⁴ Gendered divisions of labour have also produced gendered knowledge and innovation in relation to a changing climate. For example, women in Vanuatu typically work home gardens and small crops, and have adapted their farming practices and routines to support future recovery after cyclones.⁵⁵ Gendered social and ecological knowledge is also an important factor in early warning and preparation for natural disasters.⁵⁶ Communities on the different islands of the Cook Islands hold knowledge of early warning signs for storms, cyclones, or cyclone seasons, such as behaviours of certain species of fish, cloud formations, sea bird behaviour and unseasonal fruiting of different trees.⁵⁷ The Cook Islands Second Joint National Action Plan 2016-2020 recognised women as frontline responders of climate change impacts. Its outputs included increasing the number of women in climate change and disaster risk management decision-making roles, mainstreaming women and other vulnerable groups in disaster management plans, and recording gendered traditional knowledge on early warning systems.⁵⁸ However, the policy was not budgeted and lead agencies in the climate change and disaster risk management space passed over responsibility for it, subsequently it was never renewed.

⁴⁹ Cook Islands Government. *Pukapuka and Nassau Community Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2020*, (Avarua, Cook Islands: Cook Islands Government, 2016), p 5; Rongo, Teina, Celine Dyer, Mitchell Tutangata. *Rauti Para Pukapuka*, (2015). http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/unu:5856/Online_No_18_Tuvalu_Report_161207_.pdf

⁵⁰ Cook Islands Government. *Cook Islands National Security Policy 2023-2026*, p 40.

⁵¹ Cook Islands Government, *National Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment and Action Plan 2019-2024*, (Government of the Cook Islands, 2019), <https://www.intaff.gov.ck/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NPGEWE-Policy-booklet-4.pdf>

⁵² Te Puna Vai Mārama Cook Islands Centre for Research (TPVM). *In-depth gender assessment for the Enhancing Climate Information and Knowledge Services for Resilience in Five Island Countries of the Pacific Ocean project, Cook Islands*, (Rarotonga, Cook Islands: TPVM, 2023), https://assets-global.website-files.com/62899fab8c4f04ca82dc8347/656a45065c08b08c6164431d_23121_Gender_Assessment_Climate_CookIslands_%20Final.pdf

⁵³ “Australia’s partnership with Cook Islands”, Australian Government, accessed February 27, 2024. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/cook-islands/australias-partnership-cook-islands>

⁵⁴ Crichton, Richard Nathan, Miguel Esteban and Motoharu Onuki. “Understanding the preferences of rural communities for adaptation to 21st-century sea-level rise: A case study from the Samoan islands”, *Climate Risk Management* 30, (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crm.2020.100254> ; Hay, John E., *Pacific Adaptation to Climate Change: Past Approaches and Considerations for the Future*, (2011), <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/climate-change/policy/adaptation/publications/pacific-adaptation-climate-change>

⁵⁵ Clissold et al, “Women as recovery enablers”, 5-6.

⁵⁶ Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, *Climate Change and Natural Disasters Affecting Women, Peace and Security*, (March 13, 2015), p 6, <https://apwld.org/climate-change-and-natural-disasters-affecting-women-peace-and-security/> ; Dewi, Gusti Ayu Fransiska, *Midterm Review of the Sendai Framework Thematic Study: Diverse Knowledge Systems*, (December 30, 2022), p 20, <https://sendaiframework-mtr.undrr.org/publication/thematic-study-diverse-knowledge-system>

⁵⁷ Carlson, Charles, *The Revival and Integration of Traditional Knowledge and Practices for Cyclones into Government of the Cook Islands Policies and Planning*, <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/3ed02d1c-d610-4e23-83f7-f587a10a0337/content>

⁵⁸ Cook Islands Government, *Are we resilient? The Cook Islands Second Joint National Action Plan 2016-2020*. (Cook Islands Government, 2016), <https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/sites/default/files/The%20Cook%20Islands%202nd%20Joint%20National%20Action%20Plan%202016-2020.pdf>

Emergency, security and disaster management leadership in the Cook Islands is predominantly male.⁵⁹ Disaster risk management in the outer islands is the responsibility of Island Governments, who are assisted by the Red Cross. Only 8% of Island Government leadership is female.⁶⁰ On the main island of Rarotonga, emergency management is further decentralised to the village community level. 'Puna', or emergency co-ordination teams, are made up of traditional and community leaders, seconded public service workers and volunteers. Puna are described to have equal representation of women and men, and is volunteer work that is in the process of becoming formalised.⁶¹ Most of the Puna chairpersons are men, while Puna Disaster Risk Management Co-ordinators (DRMCs) and secretaries are women.⁶² If the Puna system is formalised and funded by the government, it is an opportunity for women in DRMC roles to be properly compensated for their work. As the Cook Islands is one of only two PICs considered to be high income, remuneration should be adequate. However, like other PICs, patriarchal systems and beliefs are pervasive in Cook Islands society.⁶³ It remains to be seen whether Puna leadership will have equal representation. Without this, it runs the risk of womens' and girls' particular needs in disaster recovery and relief not being met.

Conclusion

Gender and climate security is prevalent in high-level discussions and policy frameworks of the Pacific region. The highest political body in the region has made the commitment to including women and girls in climate security and processes for peace and security in the 2050 Strategy Implementation Plan and Revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration. However, the ongoing realities women face at the country level, such as high rates of domestic violence, low participation in governance and lack of political will to mainstream the WPS agenda, gender and women's human rights will continue to undermine those policies. If women at the community level, who are on the frontlines of climate change and active agents in peacebuilding, continue to live day to day without safety and security and are unable to participate in decision-making, this seriously disrupts any regional, high-level attempt to mainstream climate security and the WPS agenda. There is still much more work left for all involved in the region to ensure its women and girls, in all of their diversity, are active participants in climate adaptation and security.

As provided in the example of the Cook Islands, the government is unwilling to commit resources to implementing promises on gender equality and ending violence against women. The country's national security policy is weak, mechanisms for mainstreaming gender are dismissed and demoted, and leadership in disaster management remains male-dominated. However, if the 'Puna' system for disaster management is formalised, this will be a big step in ensuring women are supported in their role as important responders to climate impacts. Small steps such as this, as long as women are involved in the processes, are important to realising the WPS agenda and its role in climate security in the Pacific.

⁵⁹ The Cook Islands Security Council is made up of Cabinet Ministers, only one of whom is female. The National Security Committee includes the Police Commissioner, the Solicitor-General, the Director of National Security, the Principal Immigration Officer and the Comptroller of Customs, only the Principal Immigration Officer is female. The National Disaster Risk Management Council consists of the Prime Minister, Secretary of Finance, Secretary of Infrastructure, Police Commissioner, Director of Emergency Management Cook Islands, Director of Island Administration, Public Service Commissioner, and the Director of the Cook Islands Meteorological Service, currently, only the Secretary of Infrastructure is female.

⁶⁰ "Public Sector Demographics", Cook Islands Government, last modified January 1, 2024, <https://www.psc.gov.ck/public-sector-demographics>

⁶¹ Lydia Sijp, key informant interview, April 18, 2023.

⁶² Stephano Rampling-Tou, personal communication, April 23, 2024.

⁶³ SPC. *Stocktake of the gender mainstreaming capacity of Pacific Islands governments: Cook Islands*, (SPC, 2012), p 8, <https://intaff.gov.ck/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/cook-islands-gender-stocktake.pdf>

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