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# Op-Ed: Reaffirming Women As First-Responders One Year After Winston (/index.php/en/actions/archive/505-op-ed-reaffirming-women-as-first-responders-one-year-after-winston)

Written by **Media Advocacy**

Published: **16 February 2017** Hits: 1358



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The successive natural disasters that impacted the Fiji Islands in the first months of 2017 are a clear signal of the future – greater climate unpredictability, persistent droughts and stronger cyclones, resulting in more complex and frequent humanitarian emergencies. Increasingly, complex and frequent disasters are confronting an existing humanitarian system of response that is not properly prepared to cope.

What is required is more transformative, gender-inclusive agenda for humanitarian response which will ensure the rights and specific needs of women and girls in all their diversities affected by natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies are addressed in national plans, strategies and responses - including disaster risk reduction policies.

Additionally, women should not only be portrayed as victims of natural disasters and climate change. Rather, they are equal partners in designing strategies and agreements on how to tackle related issues

As we reflect on the year since Sever Tropical Cyclone (TC) Winston, it is time for reaffirming women as first-responders. It is also a time for government to not just commit, but highlight how they will work with women's civil society to meet the representation targets in decision making processes.

Since TC Winston, femLINKpacific has and continues to undertake key community-led protection and humanitarian response activities. With the support of partners and allies including ActionAid Australia, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), femLINKpacific scaled up

its Women's Weather Watch (WWW) campaign - a gender inclusive innovative method to increase women's access to information through community radio and other media.

Activated immediately following TC Ula, femLINKpacific utilised its community media network to track approaching weather systems and disseminate information and early warning messages to 150 rural women leaders.

The key to the WWW success is the act of translating scientific weather jargon in local and accessible language and proved to be an effective local and women-led tool for disaster management.

The support also meant that femLINKpacific continued its humanitarian response and protection activities through disaster assessments conducted by rural women network leaders during monthly district meetings in 14 districts and three National Consultations on Women, Peace, and Security in humanitarian crises.

At the National Consultations, the women represented from across the Central, Western and Northern divisions of the Fiji Islands as well as from various stakeholder groups including from LGBTIQ, disability and young women's organisations. Across all consultations, including round two divisional consultations in 2016, women identified food security, personal security and economic security as their most urgent protection issues.

Specifically, a core group of women leaders from 71 communities were mobilised and supported to participate in 84 district consultations, 6 divisional consultations and 3 national consultations.

They shared and received information that is resulting in women-led preparedness and response in Fiji. This provided support to the women leaders to communicate how and why the day-to-day barriers and challenges to women's participation are heightened during natural disasters because, when women are not in the decision making processes, there is greater likelihood that their ideas as well as their priorities are not included.

A key message from the WWW strategy since 2016 has been to take a women's human security and protection approach. Layered on the concept of protection are the key ideas and safety, the condition of achieving security and dignity, the feeling of empowerment, self-worth, freedom and autonomy.

This means ensuring safety and security for women and girls of all diversities in their homes and evacuation centres as well as in the process of recovery when women are more vulnerable to exploitation because essential resources such as food and water are scarce.

"Psycho-social support and rehabilitation must support women to share their stories experiences, reflections and lessons learned," outlined Adi Vasulevu of Transcend Oceania and femLINKpacific's convenor in the Northern Division. "Their inclusion is key as they are still traumatized from the crisis!"

The disaster management system must also get better at collecting and communicating Gender Inclusive Data. That means ensuring that sex, age, disability and sexual orientation gender identity and expression disaggregated data is collected, reported and analysed at all times. It can also be a practical way forward to collaborate with women's human rights groups and networks who are already working to ensure the participation of women at all levels of decision-making including in emergency and recovery.

"Without (an) updated database from the communities, we would not be sure of what the humanitarian assistance (would be for specific populations)," explained Fane Boseiwaqa, femLINKpacific's rural convenor and correspondent in the Western Division. "Information and collection of data is really important because we are able to identify why, how many people living with disabilities, the pregnant mothers, the children so in terms of having humanitarian assistance, their specific needs would be addressed through the collection of the database."

"For women with disability, access to information and communication is really needed especially during disasters," added Unaisi Bakewa Sadranu, Vice President of the Tavua Disabled People's Association, emphasising that it is vital to ensure that the specific needs of groups such as women with disabilities who too often face multiple discrimination are

addressed. “From experience, communication was not accessible and it was not accurate during the last disaster (TC Winston).”

“Another thing is the awareness. Awareness has to be done not only to the people with disability but to the stakeholders too. The stakeholders too should know how to treat women with disability especially when disaster strikes. Women living with disabilities in rural areas have been left out and some of them have not been visited. (So), if women can be resourced and given the accessibility.”

Ultimately, we know that we will continue to face extreme weather events and natural disasters which have an excessive negative impact on women and girls and that their peace and security will be at risk without a human security and protection approach.

“While there are disaster preparedness committees, they also have a vital role in response and recovery, and should not just be limited to committees in settlements,” said Mereani Nawadra, a community radio broadcaster and staff member of the Methodist Church in Fiji.

She suggested that disaster risk reduction (DRR) must be incorporated into wherever communities gather. From women’s clubs to faith groups. What is vital is inclusive representation.

“The DRR committee must include a youth member, a person with disability (and) a representative of the LGBT community,” Nawadra added.

“We must have more women’s participation in all diversities of life,” continued Vani Tuvuki, of the Koronubu Women’s Fellowship in Ba “That is pre, during and after any disaster.”

Inclusive preparedness, response and recovery requires the representation of women.

The leadership, experiences and challenges of women in all their diversities can ensure a smooth transition from relief to development and address sexual and gender-based violence as an integral and prioritised part of every humanitarian response as well as strategies to build resilient and self-reliant communities by ensuring that the traditional, cultural and societal barriers – as well as the safety, economic and political barriers.

Evidence from the WWW campaign 2016 has highlighted the reality that despite leading in their communities before and after the events of 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2016, women continue to be invisible – they are still under-represented in decision making despite a pre-existing commitment of 30%.

The impact of this was evident in the Post Disaster Needs Assessment which was gender neutral in its perspective.

It is disappointing that the status quo remains even though there has been opportunity to address the under-representation of women especially in local governance structures and there has been greater visibility of rural women speaking about the impact and recovery strategies, as well as communicating key lessons and preparedness recommendations which are missing from the formal spaces despite commitments at the World Humanitarian Summit (2016), the National Gender Policy (2014) and ratification of The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1995).

Ultimately, while natural disasters do not discriminate, nothing is gender neutral because of the inequalities in our society. Now, more than ever, there is a need for the state to ensure that women are empowered to equitably and meaningfully participate with men, their needs and interests are prioritised in strategies and responses and the human rights of women and girls are promoted and protected in all development efforts.

For more information:

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#### *Background:*

*Activated on 1st January, 2016, following Tropical Cyclone Ula, femLINKpacific's Women's Weather Watch model has since reached more than 440 rural women leaders across Viti and Vanua Levu, who represent more than 11,700 women from over 120 clubs and a further 15, 428 household members. Our rural women leaders network extends across Fiji's 14 districts including Macuata, Bua and Cakaudrove as well as Rabi Island in Vanua Levu; Navua to Nausori in the Central Division; and Ba, Nadi, Tavua and Rakiraki in the Western Division of Viti Levu. In the period July – October, our community radio stations in Suva and Labasa have together dedicated over 3,300 hours to promoting women's voice on local weather and environmental issues. During this time, femLINKpacific also organised and convened 56 monthly meetings at district level; conducted three quarterly divisional level consultations including three focus group discussions in the western division, and held our third national consultation in Suva.*

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