



Submission to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for her analytical report on a comprehensive approach to promoting, protecting and respecting women’s and girls’ full enjoyment of human rights in humanitarian situations, including good practices, challenges and lessons learned at the national, regional and international levels

Case study: Increased risks of contemporary forms of slavery for women and girls facing climate change-related disasters in Pacific Island Countries and Territories

Submitted by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition, Homes of Hope Fiji, and Pacificwin
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Introduction

The [Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative \(CHRI\)](#), [Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition](#), [Homes of Hope Fiji](#), and [Pacificwin \(New Zealand\)](#) welcome the opportunity to respond to the call for inputs from the High Commissioner to inform her forthcoming report on promoting, protecting, and respecting women’s and girls’ full enjoyment of human rights in humanitarian situations, to be presented at the 49th regular session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in February-March 2022.

The information in this submission is based on the grassroots and local efforts of the Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition, Homes of Hope Fiji, and Pacificwin combatting contemporary forms of slavery and its underlying causes in Vanuatu, Fiji, and neighbouring Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). The authors of this submission are all members of the CHRI-founded [Commonwealth 8.7 Network](#),ⁱ a group of 60+ civil society organisations from across the globe that share a common vision to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking in line with SDG Target 8.7.

For this submission, ‘contemporary forms of slavery’ includes situations of exploitation where a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, or abuse of power. It includes, but is not limited to: human trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage, domestic servitude, forced marriage, slavery like practices, and child labour. We understand the importance of addressing the underlying societal, structural, and economic drivers of these exploitative practices in order to meet SDG Target 8.7 and promote the universal enjoyment of human rights.

Women and girls facing climate change-related disasters in Pacific Island countries and territories

Millions of people are at risk of losing their shelters, livelihoods, and often, their lives due to climate change induced natural disasters and environmental degradation. The World Bank estimates that without concerted action, climate change will push 132 million people into poverty over the next 10 years.ⁱⁱ This is particularly concerning in the context of the PICTs, which are already vulnerable to the devastating impact of climate change.ⁱⁱⁱ The number of people living in the Pacific region affected by natural disasters has increased from 1.2 million to 18 million since 1980^{iv} and some of these countries are facing losses from a single event that exceed their annual gross domestic product (GDP).^v

As families lose their homes, businesses, job security, and are cut off from access to education and healthcare, they are more likely to be driven to exploitative work conditions as their sole means of subsistence. For example, in 2018 alone an estimated 32,123 Pacific Islanders were newly displaced as a result of natural disasters and in April 2020, Cyclone Harold ripped through Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu destroying schools, medical sites, houses, roads and crops.^{vi} Such ramifications of climate change will inevitably exacerbate risks related to contemporary forms of slavery.

Homes of Hope Fiji outlined the disasters that Fiji has faced just over the seven months: first, Tropical Cyclone Yasa^{vii} in December 2020 and within a month, Tropical Cyclone Ana.^{viii} These disasters destroyed entire villages and crops, in addition to deadly flooding. With each disaster, people moved in with families for support - doubling or tripling household sizes. The country is simultaneously grappling with devastating unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With minimal to zero employment among families in expanding households, and without crops, several people are desperate and hungry. Government food rations are reported to be inadequate.^{ix} Homes of Hope Fiji noted that exploitative work conditions, most notably the sex trafficking cases, are on the rise.

International cooperation, regional attention, and bold leadership are crucial to curbing the negative impacts of climate change at local and village levels in the Pacific region and progressing towards SDG Target 8.7. In order to stop this trend and protect communities vulnerable to both climate change and contemporary forms of slavery, an innovative, interdisciplinary, culturally-responsive, and gender-sensitive approach is needed. It should include the regulation of sectors involved in environmental destruction, create safe migration routes, and use the development of a green economy as an opportunity to establish new, human rights-complaint employment opportunities., as recommended by the ILO.^x

This submission will further address specific risks of contemporary forms of slavery for women and girls facing climate change-related disasters in PICTs by responding to four questions posed by the High Commissioner.

1. Please provide information on the enjoyment of human rights by women and girls in humanitarian situations, which include humanitarian emergencies, forced displacements, armed conflicts and natural disasters, including sudden-onset natural disasters and slow-onset events

Risks of SGBV in the wake of natural disasters

Global research demonstrates the exacerbating effects that disasters have on pre-existing rates of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).^{xi} Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs), where SGBV rates are already high by global standards, are especially vulnerable to increased incidents of violence in the aftermath of natural disasters.^{xii}

For example, increased rates of SGBV, including rape, were reported in Solomon Islands after the Gizo tsunami in 2007,^{xiii} a disaster that resulted in the displacement of approximately 10,000 people. Women and girls in temporary campsites after the tsunami reported feeling unsafe when travelling to water sites and bathing.^{xiv} Subsequently, a women's counselling centre in Vanuatu announced that reported cases of domestic violence increased by 300% in the wake of two major tropical cyclones in 2011.^{xv} Further, the Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition noted many reported cases of women and girls being sexually harassed

and exploited while in evacuation centers. Homes of Hope Fiji added that crises, such as natural disasters, exacerbate existing patriarchal structures within the indigenous culture, expanding the control men have over women and girls in their community. While men and boys are also victims of SGBV, existing gender inequalities and power imbalances mean that women and girls are most likely to feel the impact of increased instances of SGBV.

Disparities in power lead to fewer choices for victims and survivors of SGBV, rendering them more vulnerable to human trafficking. Human trafficking requires an act, such as transportation, through coercive or forceful means (although coercion is not required for children) for the purpose of exploitation. SGBV is linked to the 'exploitative purpose' element of human trafficking, because violence often functions as a tool of exploitation as well as a catalyst for exploitative conditions.^{xvi}

Increased risks in remote areas and villages

Pacificwin noted that in least developed and under-developed PICTs, it is particularly difficult to seek protection from exploitative conditions and abuse due to a lack of infrastructure, including lack of roads and bridges linking remote areas to major towns. This effectively hinders access to schools, hospitals, and support services. For example, there has been an increase in reported cases of Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence and killings of women and girls in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea.^{xvii} They are, however, unable to escape the abuse and exploitation due to limited awareness and lack of access to the towns where support and assistance is more likely available. This isolation is aggravated by natural disasters, as the already limited channels of transport are destroyed.^{xviii} In sum, progressive laws and protections will do little to protect women and girls in PICTs outside of major towns, until they are able to exercise their rights and have access to justice and health centres. This can be facilitated if channels of transport are safeguarded and increased, resilient to natural disasters, or when necessary, rebuilt expeditiously.

2. Please provide information on patterns and structures of discrimination and inequalities exacerbated or created by humanitarian settings, which undermine access to health-care services and information, housing, water, sanitation, education and employment, and disrupt protection systems for women and girls

Discrimination exacerbated by displacement

Global figures for internal displacement in 2019 reveal a total of 33.4 million new displacements, 75% of which were related to environmental crises and natural disasters.^{xix} Data from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Gender and Climate Alliance indicate that women and girls make up the majority of those displaced worldwide.^{xx} The overrepresentation of women and girls among the displaced reflects existing legal, economic, and educational barriers. Stereotypical gender roles also restrict women and girls who are unable to prioritise their safety or relocation in the wake of caretaking duties and often have to relocate to their husband's choice of abode. Without control over their own movement, they are more likely to be forced into unsafe locations rendering them more vulnerable to exploitation or abuse.

Understanding displacement due to natural disasters from a gendered-perspective, it is important to understand some specific risks that accompany it. First, displaced persons may resort to unsafe modes of migration, such as through the use of smugglers, as their only means of finding economic opportunities.

This, in turn, heightens risks of trafficking of women and girls, as they may be transported for the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced labour.^{xxi} Second, displacement camps can be targets for traffickers, leaving women and girls at risk of coercion for exploitative purposes. Camp inhabitants may also resort to collusion with traffickers, placing their family members in peril in order to earn money during times of crisis.^{xxii} Homes of Hope Fiji noted that exploitation often comes from within families where there is desperation to ensure they can afford food and shelter. Pacificwin further added that, in the worst examples, women and girls are traded for basic necessities during times of crisis.

The Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition also highlighted the specific vulnerabilities that women and girls face in evacuation centres due to a lack of basic necessities. Ovulating young women and girls share stories of being forced to sit in their own menstrual blood while seeking refuge in caves or in evacuation shelters following a natural disaster, as they could not bring their sanitary pads during their escape or simply because there were no toilets available for them. In many Pacific cultures, including in Vanuatu, it is a taboo for menstruating women to show blood stains on their clothes forcing them to be more or less immobile in these situations. Similarly, Homes of Hope Fiji noted that the women they support often complain that washroom facilities in evacuation centres lack basic safety measures.

Discrimination exacerbated by poverty

In addition to displacement, climate change increases poverty that is also more prevalent among and disproportionately impacts women and girls.^{xxiii} Sudden onset natural disasters can destroy shelters, savings, businesses, and even kill family members, leaving individuals in desperate need of basic necessities. For example, following the volcanic eruption in Vanuatu's Ambae Island in 2018 which resulted in the relocation of some 11,000 residents, NGOs reported that women were at increased risk of forced marriages due to pressure from families for the purpose of ensuring that they have access to basic necessities in sites of relocation.^{xxiv} Traffickers are aware of acute financial vulnerabilities following natural disasters and use these events opportunistically. Homes of Hope Fiji has found that following climate disaster evacuations, many women encounter traffickers at or near emergency shelters.^{xxv}

Discrimination in informal settlements

Homes of Hope Fiji noted that existing discriminatory structures are compounded in informal settlements where large populations lack resources and are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Homes of Hope reported that in one informal settlement they worked with prostitution and drug trafficking was tolerated only to ensure that inhabitants have enough to survive.

3. Please provide examples of concrete measures taken by your Government or organization to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of women and girls in humanitarian settings. In the context of the humanitarian programme cycle, please provide examples of measures taken to ensure protection of the human rights of women and girls in the different stages of programming (design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation).

Gender protection measures

Despite documented evidence that climate change and disaster impacts are gendered, the region's progress towards gender equality and empowerment of women in the context of natural disasters is lagging.^{xxvi} According to a report by UN Women, 80% of Pacific Island Countries have gender-blind national disaster legislation,^{xxvii} although some progress has been made. For instance, Fiji's 2013-2015 Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) report highlights the insertion of gender, protection, and human rights into disaster risk management messages, the delivery of gender and human rights awareness training for National Disaster Management Office staff, and the availability and use of gender disaggregated data in ministerial work plans.^{xxviii}

Civil society consultation

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are given limited space to participate in shaping policies on climate change and disaster risk reduction, despite being key service providers.^{xxix} However, momentum is building in some countries such as Vanuatu to strengthen these partnerships; the Vanuatu Climate Action Network (VCAN) and other CSOs are directly involved in drafting the adaptation section of the government's climate change and disaster risk reduction policy, which has had a significant influence on the needs of vulnerable groups, including women, youth, children, and persons with disabilities.^{xxx}

Women in the Pacific are at the frontlines of community support during natural disasters, and some organisations are leveraging their knowledge and capacity to act. For instance, the Women's Weather Watch programme in Vanuatu is giving women in remote areas access to timely information and building their capacity to communicate information from the Meteorological Department in simple warnings, because they know women are the first responders for many families and communities.^{xxxi}

Gender-based violence has increased in general due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many crisis centres in the Pacific were prepared to build up their resources and responses based on their prior experience with natural disasters.^{xxxii} Crisis centres in Fiji and Tonga were considered essential services during the pandemic - a feat accomplished after substantial advocacy.^{xxxiii}

The Fijian government, with the help of international organisations, has made space for NGO consultation on issues related to contemporary forms of slavery. For example, Homes of Hope Fiji is the chair of the National CSO Taskforce to combat human trafficking and is part of the Safety and Protection Cluster to combat gender-based violence under the Ministry of Women with the support of UN Women. It is also an integral NGO partner to the Fijian Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations in implementing their newly drafted National Action Plan on countering human trafficking and eliminating child labour. These plans and the consultation could materialise through the support of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Inter-governmental efforts

We commend the Pacific Islands Forum as an important intergovernmental authority in all matters concerning the Pacific Region, and the Secretariat (PIFS) as an effective and efficient organisation serving its members and key stakeholders in combating climate change and protecting the rights of women and girls. They consistently engage civil society in all matters concerning the Pacific.

PIFS established the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP), a highly active agency supporting human rights based programmes and expanding protections of all vulnerable groups.^{xxxiv} While CROP has encouraged cooperation and collaboration among various intergovernmental regional organisations, it could be doing more to listen and respond to concerns raised by civil society organisations who are yet to be recognised or resourced as critical stakeholders in social service provision. There are not many civil society organisations in the Pacific Region and they should all be acknowledged for the work they do to make a difference in the lives of women and girls. They include but are not limited to:

- Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO)
- [Pacific Council of Churches \(PCC\)](#)
- [Fiji Women's Crisis Centre \(FWCC\)](#)
- [Pacific Network on Globalisation \(PANG\)](#)
- [Pacific Youth Council](#)
- South Pacific and Oceania Council of Trade Unions (SPOCTU)
- Council of Pacific Education (COPE)
- [Pacific Disability Forum \(PDF\)](#)
- [Pacific Islands News Association \(PINA\)](#)
- [World Wide Fund \(WWF\)](#)
- [Foundations of the People of the South Pacific \(FSPI\)](#)
- [Greenpeace](#)
- Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (PCRC)
- Pacific Council of Churches
- Pacific Foundation for the Advancement of Women (PACFAW)
- Homes of Hope Fiji
- Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition
- Pacificwin
- Pacific Islands Climate Action Network (PICAN)
- Transparency International
- Innovation for Change - Pacific
- Oceania GiR and Training
- Oxfam Pacific
- International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) -SROP
- Pacific Sexual Diversity Network
- Diverse Voices for Action and Equality Network (DIVA)
- Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding (PCP)
- LMMA Network International
- Vanuatu Young Women For Change
- FemLINKPacific
- ActionAid Vanuatu

CSOs in PICTs are inadequately resourced to ensure the complete elimination of violence against women and girls in a region plagued by devastating effects of climate change. There are no groups that are dedicated solely to the issue of human trafficking in the Pacific. This points towards a resource gap which needs to be addressed as a priority.

4. What challenges does your Government or organization face in promoting, protecting and respecting women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights in humanitarian situations? Please elaborate on the nature of these challenges and steps taken to address them.

Lack of international solidarity on climate change

There is real potential for entire populations of PICTs, such as the low-lying nations of Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands, to suffer displacement due to climate change and impending natural disasters.^{xxxv} To avoid a massive influx of climate migrants, larger nations in the region and powerful governments around the globe need to take immediate concrete, concerted, and proactive steps to curb the effects of climate change.

COVID-19

Government funding and international donor sources have been diverted or postponed due to COVID-19 assistance. Many organisations within the Fijian CSO Taskforce to combat human trafficking have either shut down completely or are limited to a single employee/volunteers. Most organisations are suffering reduced hours and limited resources.

Communication

Communication continues to be a huge struggle in PICTs, which has only been worsened by the devastating economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. People lack money for data and as movement is restricted, the internet is heavily used thus limiting its availability. Cellular towers are still missing in many remote areas, resulting in isolation. Isolation and the inability to communicate outside of one's household means cases of violence and exploitation go unreported, and women and girls are unable to seek help in order to escape or identify situations of abuse. Poor communication is therefore directly related to unreported and unsupported cases of contemporary forms of slavery in the region.

Recommendations

Despite the turbulence of political instability, an international pandemic, and climate change, the resilience of Pacific peoples is noteworthy. The region continues to prioritise and lead on environmental protection, which they understand is intrinsically related to the protection of women and girls, among other intersections. Advocates continue to stand firm and garner strength from the stewardship of their waters, lands, oceans, and air. Civil society will continue to protect the most vulnerable, but they must be adequately resourced to ensure their effectiveness and continued compliance with good cultural practices. The Pacific Region needs international financial and technical support, in addition to global solidarity in the fight against climate change. In that light, we recommend the following to States and intergovernmental agencies:

- 1. Dedicate resources to a regional anti-human trafficking service in the Pacific.**
- 2. Prioritise curbing climate change across the globe and increase support to Pacific Island countries and territories that are most impacted by the negative impacts of environmental disasters and degradation.**
- 3. Fund and support infrastructure and rebuilding projects in Pacific Island countries and territories to safeguard and increase transportation and access between towns and rural areas.**
- 4. Sustainably fund National Action Plans on eradicating child labour and human trafficking and allocate greater funding and support to CSOs and NGOs that are integral to meaningfully realising these strategies.**
- 5. Reassess disaster risk reduction strategies and legislation to take a gender-sensitive approach and take proactive steps towards ensuring that evacuation centres and informal settlements and facilities therein are safe for women and girls.**

About the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent international, non-governmental organisation working for the practical realisation of human rights. Through research, advocacy and mobilisation it works to address human rights issues in the areas of access to justice, access to information, freedom of information and opinion, and contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking. Headquartered in New Delhi, CHRI has offices in London and Accra. CHRI founded and is Secretariat to the Commonwealth 8.7 Network, a global network of 60+ local civil society organisations who share a common vision to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery leading to the realisation of SDG Target 8.7.

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ⁱ See generally, <https://www.commonwealth-87.org/>.

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ⁱⁱⁱ World Bank 2012, *Pacific Islands: Disaster Risk Reduction and Financing in the Pacific*. Available from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2012/04/01/pacific-islands-disaster-risk-reduction-and-financing-in-the-pacific>. [13 July 2021].

^{iv} UN Women Fiji 2014, *Climate change disasters and gender based violence in the Pacific*, UN Women. available from: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/>. [13 July 2021].

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^{xvii} 'Papua New Guinea: Violence Against Women Accused of Sorcery' 2021, *Human Rights Watch*, 10 June. Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/11/papua-new-guinea-violence-against-women-accused-sorcery>.

^{xviii} Walk Free, CHRI 2020, *Eradicating Modern Slavery: An assessment of Commonwealth governments' progress on achieving SDG Target 8.7*, pp. 80. Available from: <https://cdn.walkfree.org/Walk-Free-Eradicating-Modern-Slavery.pdf>. [13 July 2021].

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