

Celebrating women's indigenous knowledge for sustained crises response

At times of crises, whether it is a local disaster, a massive hurricane or a pandemic, all disaster responses must take into account gender equality, social inclusion, and the women's rights agenda. We need to make sure that women are given the resources to be part of the transformative work that is needed. It starts by giving women the time and space to define what resilience and recovery means for them.

Women are on the frontlines of crises because they are living them, experiencing them at the household level. Pacific Island women have seen so many types of changes taking place because of disasters and climate change. It is not theory, and they don't need scientific evidence to say something is wrong. Women's livelihood has also been impacted severely by the COVID-19 pandemic, as they are the cornerstone of the tourism economy. Quite often, because they are working in the informal sector, they are not getting the social protection that they need. You cannot have economic security and resilience without savings and social protection.

Like many women in the global south, Pacific Island women are the custodians of local indigenous traditional knowledge. They see the first signs of disasters and have always been at the frontlines of preparedness. However, when it comes to formal decision-making, there is a real disparity in participation. In the Pacific Islands, we have the lowest numbers of women in political decision-making - in elected office, at national or local level, but also in terms of community decision-making. Women from remote rural communities cannot even afford the bus fare to take part in decision-making meetings. The meaningful participation of women requires resources to change the way meetings are held and ensure a diverse group of women can participate.

Women need access to resources. They respond to crises when they are supported. That's what we saw in April 2020 in Vanuatu. Countries were going into lockdown as Tropical Cyclone Harold, a Category Five storm, was approaching. For the very first time, the Shifting the Power Coalition supported local indigenous women in leading the crisis response in their own time, space, and knowledge. [Woman Wetem Weta](#), a system providing real-time information with local knowledge of weather and disaster management systems, involving women before, during and after natural disasters, enabled local women in Vanuatu to be the first responders and prepare their communities from an early stage.

Having a local women-led humanitarian response, instead of international actors stepping in, was also successful in the context of COVID-19. Women used the traditional mechanisms of sharing food, conducting protection assessments, and checking-in to support each other, their families, and others in their communities. The trust factor is especially important in women's leadership: other women in the communities are more willing to share information about what is happening in their household, rather than answering an official questionnaire that they may not feel comfortable with.

To empower local women leaders, we also need to tell their stories in a meaningful way. That is one of the reasons for establishing femLINKPacific. We introduced portable suitcase radio technology in 2004, training young women to operate the station and learn from producing other women's stories. It is not a wide transmission, but radio reaches women in their local communities. The pre-production process brings women together to think about the solutions to problems. That solution-oriented approach allows them to go through a process of collective learning to understand the commitments to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), gender policy,

and other engagements made. Women are then able to tell their stories in such a way that government officials listening to them are drawn into these stories.

Quantitative and qualitative research can also bring out women's stories. However, research sometimes needs to be extracted. Its value lies in locally-grounded work that helps communities identify their specific priorities. There is a greater need for participatory research to gather data on what our indigenous women are doing and to learn from their knowledge. This is essential for finding sustainable answers to crises. If the solutions are not locally-owned, we will continue to see women marginalized and my young grandson will, in turn, recite that same old song that his great-grandmother used to sing about equality, development and peace.

Author: Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls, Regional Representative of [Shifting the Power Coalition](#); Founder and former coordinator of [femLinkPacific](#).