

'How can I make this better?'

Profiles of women's leadership in disaster risk reduction in Asia and the Pacific

©UN Women/Fahad Kaizer

Introduction

Women are excellent leaders, yet they are still underrepresented in decision-making and leadership in disaster risk reduction.

When you work in a field where you are in the minority, it can feel isolating. This collection seeks to recognize and celebrate just a few of the many amazing women leading disaster risk reduction efforts across Asia and the Pacific, in the hope that these profiles will inspire other women doing the same.

Women's equal participation and leadership in public life, including disaster risk reduction, is both an important goal in itself and essential for reducing disaster risk and achieving a broad range of sustainable development goals.

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) is committed to supporting women's leadership in disaster risk reduction, including through our flagship Women's International Network on Disaster Risk Reduction (WIN DRR). We know that diversity in leadership improves results, and well-designed disaster risk reduction initiatives that provide for women's full and effective participation advances gender equality and women's empowerment while building our collective resilience.



“What can I do to lay the foundation for other women to succeed in DRR?”

Vasiti Soko, Fiji

Page 6

“Knowledge of disasters must be shared with future generations.”

Dr. Nuraini Rahma Hanifa, Indonesia

Page 12

“There are more challenges every year because of climate change.”

Manisha Pantha, Nepal

Page 17

“Women in the communities are active participants in building disaster preparedness.”

Lea Ivy Manzanero, Phillipines

Page 24

“The foundation for reducing disaster risk is understanding what those risks are.”

Disaster Data in the Pacific

Page 30

“There is a growing crisis with climate-related disasters.”

Rumana Khan, Bangladesh

Page 34



“Leadership is about being able to look at what is happening around you and think, ‘How can I make this better?’”

Mami Mizutori
Special Representative of the
Secretary-General for Disaster
Risk Reduction and
Head of UNDRR

“Empowering women and persons with disabilities to publicly lead and promote gender equitable and universally accessible response, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction approaches is key.”

Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction



What is WIN DRR?

The Women's International Network on Disaster Risk Reduction is a professional network to support women working in disaster risk reduction, in all their diversity. The overall goal of WIN DRR is to empower women to attain leadership and enhance their role in decision-making in disaster risk reduction in Asia Pacific. WIN DRR works to:

Build the evidence base

WIN DRR commissions research on women's decision-making in disaster risk reduction, documents good practices and case studies, and disseminates them widely.

Strengthen leadership capacities

WIN DRR provides professional development opportunities and leadership training, and mentorship and peer-to-peer support programmes for women working in disaster risk reduction.



Recognise women's achievements

WIN DRR supports women's participation in disaster risk reduction conferences and events, and presents annual awards for women's leadership.

Support institutions to enhance women's leadership

WIN DRR supports institutions working on disaster risk reduction to adopt strategies and policies to help reduce the barriers women face in advancing their careers, and enhance women's leadership.



PROFILE
Vasiti Soko, Fiji

“What can I do to lay the foundation for other women to succeed in DRR?”

Vasiti Soko is the winner of the 2021 WIN DRR Leadership Award for Excellence in the field of disaster risk reduction, proudly sponsored by SM Prime. She is the first female Director of Fiji’s National Disaster Management Office (NDMO). Since she was appointed in 2019, Vasiti coordinated Fiji’s response to seven tropical cyclones and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Vasiti has worked to ensure effective inter-cluster coordination with a focus on resource mobilisation, leadership, reporting, information sharing, and inclusion of vulnerable groups.

For Vasiti, taking the country’s lead role in disaster management in 2019 provided the opportunity to make a direct impact in communities across Fiji. “It meant that we could change the policies,” she says. “The NDMO can influence decision-makers about changing rules around disasters for the benefit of disaster-prone communities.”

As Director she introduced changes that included the introduction of sign language during press conferences, and engaging private sector partners in emergencies, as part of a plan to build an inclusive disaster response network. “I believe that the government should not have to work alone, our collaboration with civil society, and other stakeholders before, during and after emergencies will enable us to effectively assist disaster affected communities,” says Vasiti.

Being at the helm of the NDMO has enabled Vasiti and her team to improve the level of preparedness across the country. One way they have done this is by making key messages on disasters more accessible “Making them accessible to people living with disabilities, and translating them into the vernacular languages has enabled us to clearly disseminate messages on building back better, food security and psychological support. This helps to ensure that no one is left behind.”

Vasiti says it is critical that vulnerable members of societies can receive messages in real time; and so the NDMO team under her leadership has opened new pathways to communicate with the vulnerable groups. This includes building emergency communication systems that facilitate two-way exchange of information that enables groups and communities to share their feedback. To strengthen community feedback the NDMO and its civil society partners are trialling the “Standardising Community Based Disaster Risk Training”, which will facilitate the flow of information and knowledge sharing.

Through this exercise the formation of community disaster committees mobilises communities to engage in preparatory work and support government efforts to respond in the recovery phase. Vasiti and the NDMO team are mining the organisation’s archives to enrich their data set on disasters, “I’ve asked the team to start digitising all our historical sit-reps. We’ve been able to identify patterns of tropical cyclones, develop and apply impact base forecasting and identify communities that have been repeatedly exposed to floods or storm surges.”

“Science and technology are complementing each other to mitigate disaster risks and the NDMO will work very closely with key government departments to ensure that data is analysed and utilised for effective coordination and response. This data will also help us to identify training priorities for communities vulnerable to disasters,” Vasiti says.

Prior to assuming her current role, Vasiti co-founded the MobileMe project with the Fiji Disabled Peoples Federation. Together, they created a mobile application webtool called “MobileMe” which maps facilities on roads, pavements, and footpaths to assist mobility for those living with disabilities. Vasiti was drawn to her current role in part because she grew up with a unique view of disaster response. “My father was in the army and was a first responder during times of disaster; he was a role model of sorts for me and I can now relate to the satisfaction he felt when responding to people needing assistance.”



Vasiti has lived experience of disasters, “I’ve seen firsthand the impact of disasters and climate change. I experienced many cyclones and floods that caused widespread damage and affected the lives of many communities, and this motivated me to try and make a difference if I ever got the opportunity.”

Vasiti is married to a medical doctor and they have four children. She values her family and has been able to further her career with their support. In her spare time Vasiti helps run a charity organisation that addresses stigma about menstruation called “Veinanumi” (iTaukei for considering the needs of others). Working with four women, the organisation collects and distributes disposable and reusable sanitary napkins to rural women and girls across Fiji. In 2020, the group also donated seedlings to support food security for families that were impacted by COVID-19.

Vasiti has a background in geo-science and data analysis and authored the first pacific women in geospatial science magazine, in support of STEM and to encourage girls to explore science. Working in the male-dominated field of disaster response and management has not deterred Vasiti. “I think it has inspired me, I often think about why women have not ventured into this space and what can I do to lay the foundation for other women to enter and succeed in this field. “Everyone is given an opportunity to make a difference; I encourage them to start small and do it from the heart. Doing our part well will have a ripple effect which will touch the lives of many in our community.”



“I’ve seen firsthand the impact of disasters and climate change. I experienced many cyclones and floods that caused widespread damage and affected the lives of many communities, and this motivated me to try and make a difference if I ever got the opportunity.”

Vasiti Soko
Fiji



“Community is important because your neighbor will be the first responder in times of a disaster.”

Jazmin Aguisanda-Jerusalem
Philippines



“As a woman working in this field, I feel happy that I am supporting our communities to understand how they can build their resilience.”

Mary Alalo
Solomon Islands



“We need to ask how disaster planning can be inclusive to all people. That inclusion should be framed from a gender, cultural, collective rights and from a disability perspective.”

Pratima Gurung
Nepal



“We should change our mindset from a crisis management to a risk management approach.”

Adelina Kamal
Indonesia

“Knowledge of disasters must be shared with future generations.”



PROFILE
Dr. Nuraini Rahma Hanifa
Indonesia

Dr. Nuraini Rahma Hanifa is the 2021 winner of the WIN DRR Rising Star Leadership Award for her work in the field of disaster risk reduction. She works with the Research Center for Geotechnology, Research Organisation of Earth Sciences, National Research and Innovation Agency. Rahma founded U-INSPIRE Indonesia in 2018 and U-INSPIRE Alliance with allies in eight countries in 2019. It brings together youth and young professionals working in Science, Engineering, Technology and Innovation to better understand and reduce disaster risk.

“Big events like earthquakes and tsunamis happen very rarely,” says Rahma. “So if knowledge is not passed through generations, it will be lost. We try to capture the transgenerational knowledge on disasters.”

Rahma says U-INSPIRE enhances collaboration, innovation, risk-informed development and science-based policy related to DRR. The U-INSPIRE Alliance is now active in 12 countries in Asia and the Pacific and brings young professionals together with governments and the United Nations to build capacity and develop knowledge products for disaster risk reduction. “The platform provides empowerment,” Rahma says. “It is a place to share opportunities, and to open doors so more women can engage. U-INSPIRE will accelerate the effort for disaster risk reduction in the country and across the region.”

In March 2011, Rahma experienced the earthquake and tsunami in Japan as she was presenting her work at an international conference on the science of megathrust earthquakes and tsunamis. She was sharing her research on the potential source of a megathrust earthquake and tsunami in Java, in her home country of Indonesia. "It was a turning point in my life," she recalls. "The experience of a big earthquake with our children with us; it was really scary."

As a scientist, she was able to deepen her appreciation for the families in disasters. "I think it motivated me on how to help people facing this kind of situation. There are so many people that we need to take care of when a disaster hits."

Rahma and her family including her two toddlers were evacuated to a mall in front of the train station and provided with emergency food and supplies. Rahma says since that experience she always has an emergency bag on hand because she understands that it can happen anytime.

However, she sometimes encounters opposition from others. "In Indonesia many of the people say it is God's will," Rahma says. "Many people say: 'We cannot do anything, it's our fate.' However they can understand that we can prepare our umbrellas before it rains. It's the same for earthquakes and tsunamis: we can do something so we don't lose so many people."

She sees her role as a bridge between science and government policy, and as a conduit for sharing community perspectives on disasters at the highest levels, Rahma is mindful of the significance of her role. "The responsibility inspires me to do the best that I can do for them," she says. U-INSPIRE has made it easier for other women and young people to find a voice. "We have more women and young people that understand the importance of mainstreaming disaster risk reduction," Rahma explains. "This will accelerate disaster risk reduction in Indonesia."

She knows that young people must be part of the change. The first step is accessing the conversation with a seat at the virtual table. She says many young people have difficulties networking and finding a platform to be heard. "With U-INSPIRE, we decided to make the platform because we had similar anxieties about disasters and we shared a vision of what the solution might be."

U-INSPIRE collaborates across disciplines with people from diverse backgrounds. She says through the connection with UN agencies and other partners, they began to get opportunities to amplify their voices in global forums. "We provide empowerment, opportunities and we open doors for people, so more women can engage," Rahma says.

Connecting with others is also a key step to accessing new information and knowledge from the international network of experts working on DRR. “We need to learn from other countries. Knowledge sharing is important. It’s helpful to get ideas on how to implement DRR activities and how to mobilise resources.” Rahma has grown accustomed to the gender imbalance in disaster risk reduction but she says it is slowly changing. “We have very few females in this field, I’m used to working in a male-dominated environment.”

When she started working at the National Center for Earthquake Studies, she says she was always taking detailed notes in every meeting. “You need to show that you can do it and that you can deliver as well as men,” Rahma says. She was then entrusted as co-editor on national publications for the Research Center for Geotechnology, Research Organisation of Earth Sciences, National Research and Innovation Agency and she joined the national survey team on significant earthquake disasters that happened in Indonesia, such as the Lombok 2018 and Palu 2018 earthquakes.

Rahma is committed to a career in disaster risk reduction. “It’s not a one-year project, it needs a long-term approach to advocacy. We have to ensure that knowledge on disasters can be passed through our generation to future generations,” she says. “With major earthquakes and tsunamis happening every 100 to 600 years, the disaster might happen in our lifetime or in our grandchild’s lifetime.”

Documenting intergenerational experiences of disasters in a consistent, useful way is the biggest challenge, she says, in order to better inform policies and planning. She says digitalisation of shared knowledge, including for disaster risk reduction is crucial to empower all actors, communities, but most of all women.

She’s inspired by the recognition of the WIN DRR Leadership Rising Star Award, but sees her role as part of a wider struggle. “This award is for all women and young professionals in the region,” Rahma says. “There are many women in Indonesia, and also through Asia and the Pacific who have immense potential, who lack self confidence. We are struggling to encourage more women into higher education and to pursue their dreams, and even dare to venture into long term career paths in the currently male-dominated sphere of disaster research.”

She says gender equality in disaster risk reduction will come when women are given equal opportunities. “When women are provided with opportunities, pathways and trust,” Rahma says, “we can achieve beyond our imagination.”





“When women are provided with opportunities, pathways and trust, we can achieve beyond our imagination.”

Dr. Nuraini Rahma Hanifa
Indonesia

“We need to develop women leaders to support good governance & disruptive collaborations.”

Bijal Brahmhatt
India





“Women are good at sorting out problems. We have good relationships to negotiate solutions.”

Kimcheng Chan
Cambodia

“It is essential to raise awareness among women leaders that climate change and global warming are issues of their concern. Without this, they would not know that their roles are vital.”



Nonticha Wansawang
Thailand

“There are more challenges every year because of climate change.”

PROFILE
Manisha Pantha, Nepal

Manisha Pantha is a Nurse and Training Course Material Specialist in Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response Division at National Society for Earthquake Technology of Nepal. She works for the Program for Enhancement of Emergency Response in Nepal. Manisha is a humanitarian first-responder on a mission to get more women involved in disaster risk management planning so communities can better cope with the impacts of disasters and climate change.

Manisha’s nursing career began with a tragedy. After just six months of nursing practice, there was a deadly accident in a nearby village where she was stationed in rural Nepal.

“A jeep rolled down the mountain and all the 30 people were brought to the hospital,” Manisha recalls. “It was a very basic facility with 30 casualties coming in. The hospital was in chaos because there were no resources readily kept in reserve for such a situation.”

“There was no planning,” she says. “They did not know what they would do when there were so many patients at the same time.”

After that event, the medical team had a meeting in the hospital. They raised the issue of disaster risk management and hospital preparedness, and for Manisha it was a turning point. “I started realising I would not be reaching lots of people by just doing nursing,” she says. “I entered the field of disaster management where I can do public health.”



Manisha helps hospitals in managing disaster preparedness and response plans. "I realised that field treatment first aid is equally important as a hospital preparedness program."

She is one of the developers for a curriculum of basic emergency medical response, community search and rescue and damage assessment trainings. Because Nepal is vulnerable to climate-related disasters, she could see that the need for better responses in emergencies was essential.

"Every year we have so many disasters caused by landslides, floods, earthquakes and fires," Manisha says. "There are more challenges added every year because of climate change."

The intensity of the monsoon is increasing and Nepal now gets more floods and bigger, more deadly floods. Nepal is also experiencing more extreme heat waves causing a surge in fires. "Because of increasing heat during the summer season we have lots of fires and the intensity of the fires has increased," she says.

One of the major challenges of the changing climate is the unpredictability of where the disasters might hit. "Every year there is a change in the pattern of the monsoon," she says. "This has a direct impact on the pattern of landslides."

With floods and landslides at the top of the list of climate impacts, Manisha says it's important to train more people at different levels on how to respond and save lives when disasters hit. "We have to go to the communities," she says.

"The community are the real first-responders. The idea is to develop community responders, especially women, because women already are first-responders in the community for their children and family."

Manisha says the vision is to reach women and develop their capacity to be involved in disaster response activities. She says she is able to build trust with other women in rural communities throughout Nepal and encourage them to learn the life-saving techniques. She says it's an important element in getting women to overcome cultural norms and beliefs that too often hold women back.

"The women trust me as a fellow woman to explain how important the search and rescue process is," she says. "I am the instructor for search and rescue operations and when I'm lifting a heavy load or when I show them how to extinguish a fire, they can see that it is possible."

Manisha trains women and other professional responders from security forces in a wide range of skills from rescue to resuscitation. She even teaches women how to cut through different surface walls including concrete walls and rubble to save lives.

"I show women how to cut a concrete wall," she says. "After they see that, they are more confident and they are willing to learn."

The goal is to empower women and other members of the community to be able to take immediate action when disasters hit. Beyond increasing the overall numbers of trained responders, Manisha says women bring new perspectives and ideas.

"Women bring unique skills to any emergency response," she says. "They know how to connect with victims and keep them calm. When someone is injured or trapped by debris, it makes a big difference when the rescue worker has emotional skills that can reassure the person in distress."

In addition to techniques to get people out of debris, Manisha says climate change has made flood rescue skills more important than ever so people can be pulled from raging rivers.

“Swift water rescue is different from what we do in stagnant or deep and deep dive water rescue,” she says. “We need many people on the ground who can save lives without putting themselves at risk. Training is critical and with the climate crisis increasing monsoon floods, we need more first and professional responders with equipment to save people from floods.

Along with swift water rescue training, Manisha and her team teach communities how to prepare for and respond to landslides, fires and other emergencies. She says they have shifted focus towards multi-hazard and ‘complex’ emergencies because disasters are increasingly complex and compounded.

“During COVID-19 we had two other emergencies,” she says. “It was a complex emergency. There was a lot of confusion about what to do and what not to do.”

In the midst of a pandemic, one part of Nepal experienced extreme floods that they were not well-prepared for because they were not accustomed to this amount of rainfall in this region.

“Debris flows swept away one whole town,” she says. “This was completely unexpected. That area did not have a flood for a long time but all of a sudden the water was so high.”

Since 2015 Manisha has trained more than 2,000 women in Nepal for preparedness, risk reduction and response to disasters in emergency rescue techniques. While she is heartened by progress in expanding the network of women involved in disaster planning, she feels there is still more to be done to strengthen systems to save lives from future disasters and climate change.

“I am inspired by the many women I have trained,” Manisha says. “They are out in their communities sharing what they have learned and that means far fewer people will die in the next disaster.”

Manisha says training needs to be expanded and continue beyond just basic rescue techniques. “In a disaster, every second counts,” she says. “We have to equip communities with the skills to save lives because Nepal is at high risk of multiple hazards and climate change only makes it worse.”







©Om Kala Khanal

“We can help communities become earthquake safe by developing & implementing a procedure to manage & minimize risk.”

Om Kala Khanal
Nepal

“We must ensure that our basic lifelines and critical infrastructure are built to withstand disaster and climate risks.”

Loren Legarda
Phillippines



©Loren Legarda

“We must work on dismantling conscious and unconscious biases in our work culture.”



Sandra Wu
Japan

“Women tend to be more inclusive because we have been excluded from leadership for generations that we are now more aware of bringing others in.”

Aparna Sathianathan
India



“Women in the communities are active participants in building disaster preparedness.”



PROFILE
Lea Ivy Manzanero, Philippines

Lea Ivy Manzanero works as the Project Lead for the Program on Resilient Communities of the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. She's based in Manila but works in communities across the Philippines to develop evidence-based research on the impacts of disasters on marginalised groups. Her work shapes decisions by policymakers and disaster managers by mixing data with grassroots perspectives.

Lea says the lack of gender equality in decision-making has made it harder for women to be heard in disaster planning and in all aspects of Philippine society.

“Government agencies are usually led by men,” Lea says. “It makes the work challenging for women because there are a lot of barriers that prevent us from taking a lead role.”

Lea conducts evidence-based research which helps communities map their capacities to manage and reduce disaster risks, and identify how different grassroots networks work together to reduce disaster risk. She says that women’s inputs in disaster planning are essential. “Women in the communities are active participants in building disaster preparedness. We need to reach out to them and support them.”

“Women deserve opportunities because they have a lot to contribute,” Lea says. “They can help improve the way we do humanitarian, development work and disaster preparedness.”

Beyond the work mapping community organisations, Lea also looks at how marginalised groups access services in disasters and identifies where there are gaps. The research gives data points to discussions that had previously been overlooked.

“Less than 1% of the population that experience disasters have access to a mental health support system,” she says. “It makes it challenging for people who endure the disasters not to have something or someone to support them.”

To address this, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative is conducting a research on the mental health and psychosocial support providers in the Philippines to understand the types of services they provide, identify the institutions they coordinate with and the support they need to better serve people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Not only is Lea’s research highlighting areas where greater coordination is needed but it is also challenging conventional narratives about women.

“In disasters, sometimes people look at women as victims,” Lea says. “With women taking an active role, we see them as empowered members of society that lead their communities in disaster preparedness and coping with climate change impacts.”

As Lea and her team documented the groups that were taking action on disasters, she was struck by how central women were to the climate preparedness discussion. “Women form organizations and they implement mangrove reforestation activities,” she says.



“Women deserve opportunities because they have a lot to contribute.”

Lea Ivy Manzanero
Phillippines

Lea says women are acting with urgency on climate issues because they are the ones who experience the impacts of climate disasters. “We are witnessing the effects of climate change,” she says. “We see washed-out houses and damaged mangroves. We hear the lived experiences of communities: how climate change is impacting them, their fear of storm surges, how their crops died from drought.”

Through inclusive engagement sessions, Lea builds trust with community leaders and they share their experiences of coping with disasters.

“We work with communities that are subject to constant flooding,” she says. “Every time there is a high-tide, the water enters their houses. Climate change impacts are very real for them; they live through it most of their lives.”

Lea says the extensive engagement with communities as well as evidence-based research informs their publications and that in-turn shapes policies. “Our role conducting evidence-based research is to provide data that can guide policymakers, NGOs, humanitarian workers and people working in disaster risk reduction,” she says. “The data helps them design their program activities or their policies so that it helps communities build back better, be more resilient and be more disaster-prepared.”

Lea says the progress can be slow, but she’s pleased that a recent bill in the Senate calls for a government Department of Disaster Resilience in support of localising disaster preparedness that would seek to reduce disaster risk. She says a major problem is disasters driving migration to already overcrowded urban areas where services can be limited.

“Some of the women we engaged with were displaced by typhoons and ended up in urban areas,” she says. “They are climate migrants. They move to the city to find a better life and end up in a highly congested area: a marginalised urban community in metro Manila.”

This instinct to escape the devastation at home and seek work in the city can leave women vulnerable to health hazards and even more climate disasters.

“In the city women are relying on a degraded environment,” Lea says. “The urban poor or slum-dwellers represent some of the most vulnerable populations because of the absence of alternative options. They live in dangerous locations that are vulnerable to climate change effects. These locations are often lacking protective infrastructure like drainage or the means to cope with the impacts of disaster.”

Lea says the unhygienic conditions can create further risks. “We see women living in conditions that have no shower facilities and no drinking water,” she says. “The settlements have a lot of garbage, they are densely populated areas and constantly exposed to disasters.”

Lea is worried that climate change could accelerate this trend of displacement and leave many women in danger.

“As climate change intensifies, there is a chance that more people from rural areas will move to urban areas,” she says. “We see women getting even more exposed in an area where they have no support system.”

She says a coordinated effort is needed to address the issue of climate migration and it needs to start with discussions at the local level on how to reduce risk in urban and rural communities.

“If rural areas were disaster resilient, there is no need for women to go to highly congested areas in an urban setting where they will be more exposed to climate disasters,” Lea says. “We need to help people understand the risks and build systems to help women stay connected to their communities.”

Lea says the combination of data and stories from the community consultations means that women’s concerns are addressed by development and humanitarian efforts. “It’s about ensuring that women’s needs during a disaster are reflected in project designs,” she says. “We want the voices of the community to be amplified by those working on policies and designs of infrastructure.”

Lea has seen many instances where architects and planners have pursued forced relocation for residents without listening to the community. She has seen first hand when teams of experts do vulnerability studies and find that the area is highly vulnerable to disaster and then push to relocate communities.

In one of the coastal communities that Lea worked with, the people near a landslide-prone mountain were relocated to another area. Despite government warnings, the people moved back to the hazard-prone area because of their familiarity with the neighborhood, attachment to the community and access to jobs.

“Most people do not want to relocate,” she says. “Our study found that 70% of people said they would want money to improve their houses to better withstand the damages of typhoons. If people are given the chance they would rather stay in their own place rather than move somewhere else.”

Lea is also researching the power of community cohesion and ‘sense of place’ because she feels it is an aspect of resilience that should be considered by policy-makers and planners in order to build back better.

With this critical insight and perspective, the next step is to engage architects and planners to find solutions to help people improve their homes.

“This is where architects’ creative thinking for designing disaster-proof houses can come out,” she says. “It’s about finding ways to involve the community in making the designs and finding out what they want in their communities.”

Lea says the process of engaging communities about their concerns creates the spaces for women to exercise leadership.

“Women in the communities are active participants in building disaster preparedness,” she says. “We need to reach out to them and support them.”





**“We are part of society.
We are not a burden
to society, but a
contributor to
development.”**

Corazon Clarin
Philippines

**“We need an attitude of care
in addressing disasters &
climate change at a global
level.”**

Pamela Gloria Cajilig
Philippines



©Regine Barquillo



“With geospatial mapping tools, I can really help the people who help people.”

Ayeisha Sheldon
Australia

“Systemic barriers and sexism actively push women out of science and technology.”

Dr Siouxsie Wiles, MNZM,
Aotearoa/New Zealand



Data in the Pacific

Female leaders from across the Pacific discuss the gaps and opportunities related to the production and use of disaggregated disaster and climate data to build a resilient and inclusive Blue Pacific.

Litea Biukoto , Fiji

“The foundation for risk reduction and development is understanding what those risks are,” says Litea Biukoto. “Understanding those risks means that you need to understand the hazard landscape. What are the elements of risk that we're dealing with and then what do we do to reduce them?”

Litea is the Team Leader for Risk Reduction with the Pacific Community based in Suva. She says good data about women is essential in dialogue about development and disaster planning.

“We have to spend time with partners explaining the data collection process, but also helping them understand why we're collecting this data,” she says. “Then you see the light come on when you start to explain why this type of disaggregated data is important.”

“The foundation for risk reduction and development is understanding what those risks are.”

Litea Biukoto
Fiji



Litea says disaggregated data helps inform risk assessments that are now driving long-term development plans; this ensures that they are inclusive, and no one is left out.

She admits that data alone is not the solution, but part of a mosaic of tools in disaster risk reduction. "There is no silver bullet, but a suite of solutions that countries and even communities need to consider," she says. "Having data systems in place with consultations with the community helps ensure that the designs that are being considered are not just environmentally sound, but also culturally sensitive."

Taiaopo Faumuina, Samoa

"It is important to collect demographic information from the people, so policy makers and planners know who is affected and who is in need following a disaster," Taiaopo says.

Taiaopo Faumuina is the Assistant Chief Executive Officer at the Samoa Bureau of Statistics in the division of Census, Survey and Demography. She says the process of standardising the collection of data after disasters was done in close consultation with partners.

"We started using the ideas from the Sendai Framework," she says. "We adapted the information for Samoa and share it with our partners, especially those working with the Disaster Management Office so that it captures the information they need most."

"Data speaks louder than words. Our leaders use the data that we share to support women."

Taiaopo Faumuina
Samoa



Taiaopo says the template has been used in multiple disasters in recent years and the process is now digital with tablets in the hands of her team and community partners to streamline the collection process.

Data helps decision-makers better understand the needs and make the case for gender equality. “Data speaks louder than just words,” says Taiaopo. “Our leaders use the data that we share to support their arguments about women and increase the number of women participating in leadership.”

Susan Grey, Fiji

Susan is the Executive Director of femLINKpacific, a Pacific feminist media organisation that supports a network of rural women in Fiji.

“The challenges in the fight for gender equality and gender justice are enormous,” she says. “But it is not just about the culture, it's also the systems in place.”

Susan and her network organise regular public sessions where communities can express their concerns on a range of issues and their voices are heard. The group compiles the stories and the data, so the government has a better sense of the diverse needs of vulnerable groups. Susan says this data has helped make the case for improved services where they are needed.

After Cyclone Yasa, a category 5 storm, devastated parts of Fiji earlier in the year, Susan says they have been seeing a surge in concerns about the integrity of evacuation centers. “There's a lot of

feedback that keeps coming. There were a lot of issues with the evacuation centers that were supposed to be safe and secure.”

Susan says inadequate disaster planning had tragic consequences during that cyclone.

“We've had two cases where deaths occurred in evacuation centers and that was just the structure of that evacuation center,” she says. “In one community, a mother was breastfeeding her child in the school when a wall fell on them. Sadly, the child passed away.”

Susan says some of the evacuation centers have not been designed for extreme storms nor to meet the needs of women and other vulnerable groups.

“In the past rural women have not always been vocal in calling for evacuation centers that are safe and inclusive. We speak with women that have a disability, and they are reluctant to go to evacuation centers because it is not accessible for them. With the LGTQI+ community, many have said that they'd rather be at home. They don't even feel safe going to these evacuation centers.”

Susan says good data can help make the case for funding to prioritise better shelters in Fiji. “There is a lot that could be done to improve the whole system of disaster planning and having data is critical.”



“There is a lot that could be done to improve the whole system of disaster planning and having data is critical.”

Susan Grey
Fiji



“We are working to ensure there is continuity of services, despite armed conflicts, despite disasters and despite COVID-19”



Sittie Rajabia Monato
Philippines



“Adequate capacity building measures need to be taken to empower women for preparedness as well as to build their capacity to secure alternate means of livelihood in post-disaster situations.”

Sendai Framework for
Disaster Risk
Reduction

A photograph showing a flooded area in Bangladesh. In the foreground, there are several thatched huts made of mud and straw, some with people standing nearby. A dirt path leads through the huts towards a body of water in the background. The sky is overcast and grey. The overall scene depicts a community affected by flooding.

PROFILE:
Rumana Khan, Bangladesh

“There is a growing crisis with climate-related disasters.”

Rumana Khan is the gender-based violence sub cluster coordinator with UNFPA in Bangladesh. She works in emergencies in one of the most flood-prone countries in the world and is part of a community of humanitarians who are innovating to anticipate the needs of the most vulnerable and support them during disasters.

Rumana says the intensity and frequency of the floods have increased in recent years and it's creating greater vulnerabilities for women and girls. "The impact that it has on the lives of the people is significant," she says. "Besides tropical cyclones we get tidal surges and that also adds to the number of displacements."

Rumana says the back-to-back disasters and displacement makes it harder for communities in Bangladesh to recover, especially women, girls and the marginalised groups. "A large proportion of the population is still below the poverty line, and recurring disasters reduce their ability to safeguard themselves or even to recover from the impact."

With a population of 166.3 million and floods becoming more severe, disasters can wipe out livelihoods and leave communities at risk. Women, girls, and hijra (third gender) are especially vulnerable, and when viewed with an intersectional approach the impact of disasters on these marginalised groups is even higher.

A culture of collaboration and improved efficiency has led to the development of a system of anticipatory action in Bangladesh, where humanitarians act before the disaster hits. The idea is that humanitarians act even before the disaster hits. Using a forecast data model of how much rainfall will lead to floods, the system is designed to distribute supplies and prepare for service delivery before the bridges and roads get washed out.

Weather models are used to trigger activation of the anticipatory action and partners start work before the floods hit. "Once the anticipatory action system is activated, partners need to complete their activities within five days before the water comes down and floods the areas at risk," she says.

The idea is to ensure communities are supported with adequate risk mitigation measures. "We provide support so they are able to survive the flood better," she says. "It reduces the need for response and is also more cost effective. Anticipatory action is also seen as a more dignified rights-based approach."

"Floods are recurring incidents," she says. "We have a good record of these incidents happening so we can anticipate when the flood will happen in these communities."

Supporting partners and the local government organisations who are living in the community is essential, because their lives are affected. "These are small organisations" she says. "Most of them are women-led, and they are often underfunded."

These partner organisations sometimes do not have safety items for themselves or supplies to reach the target population. "Women are usually front-liners," she says. "Because our partners are women, they are able to reach those women and girls in affected populations. During a flood this becomes a challenge for them so we try to reduce the risk."

Rumana says they are trying to build the capacity of community volunteers so they can take mitigation measures on their own. Over the past decade, Rumana has seen real progress in the way Bangladesh handles disasters. "Disaster management in Bangladesh has had a lot of success in terms of saving lives and reducing mortalities during cyclones and this has been possible because of successful early warning and evacuation to shelters."

“Disaster management in Bangladesh has had a lot of success in terms of saving lives and reducing mortalities during cyclones and this has been possible because of successful early warning and evacuation to shelters.”

The National Cyclone Preparedness Programme coordinates community volunteers who play a crucial role in sharing early warning messages and evacuations to shelters. There are also systems in place to provide life-saving assistance of food and water in the shelter.

While early warning and evacuations are well advanced, Rumana says protection against gender-based violence in an emergency is a relatively new aspect among humanitarians addressing climate-related disasters in Bangladesh. She leads a national gender-based violence sub-cluster that builds capacity in gender-based violence in emergencies, ensures quality and standardisation of efforts during disasters and shares data with partners to improve future responses.

“It has only been a few years that we really started thinking of gender-based violence in an emergency, and particularly in the context of flood, cyclone etc,” she says. “Sadly many people are still complacent about it.”

The sub-cluster and its efforts to mainstream the ‘Minimum Standards for Prevention and Response to Gender-based Violence in Emergencies’ is strengthening the capacity of local NGOs and government are reasons for hope.

During the pandemic, Rumana and partners have sought to improve digital services to maintain support for communities by increasing discussions on key issues including mental health. “We have boosted the virtual support through phone services like the hotline,” she says. “Women and girls can call up to ask for advice on sexual reproductive health, gender-based violence or get support for mental health.”

Despite many innovations in humanitarian work like digital connectivity and anticipatory action, gender inequality remains a challenge in Bangladesh. “This is a very male-dominated industry where you see very few women in decision-making roles. This narrative of gender imbalance must change.”

The lack of gender parity motivates Rumana to continue to work in disaster risk reduction. She says she is “keeping the space” for women.





©UN0286415/G.M.B. Akash