

# **LIVING WITH VULNERABILITIES: EXPLORING GENDERED VULNERABILITY TO TROPICAL CYCLONE WINSTON IN A FIJIAN VILLAGE**

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## **Introduction**

This paper is the outcome of a research project presently undertaken by the author on “Gender and Natural Disasters in Fiji”. The objective of this paper is to understand the gendered vulnerability to category five Tropical Cyclone Winston that made land fall on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2016 on the islands of Northern Viti Levu and Southern Vanua Levu. The research was conducted in a Fijian village in the Province of Tailevu in Viti Levu. Although natural disasters, especially cyclones have been researched in Fiji, the gender dimension is not widely addressed. Using qualitative methods, the paper discusses how gender is an important dimension to consider in the context of understanding hazards and vulnerability.

## **Methodology**

Considering the increasing incidence of natural disasters and their varying impacts, during the last four decades, ‘gender’ has become a cross cutting theme in the disaster literature (Bradshaw 2009). The social, cultural and behavioral traits associated with a man or woman in a society defines his or her ‘gender identity, roles and responsibilities’ (Moser and Moser 2005). Therefore, a man’s or woman’s vulnerability during a hazard is related to their pre-assigned roles and responsibilities in the domestic and public spheres, access to communal resources, role in decision making, degree of power and access to knowledge.

Oxfam (2011) proposes that hazards can become a disaster when they hit a vulnerable community that does not have the capacity to

respond and protect itself from an event. Thus, hazards affect people differently as they are located in different social and natural terrains. According to the UN (2004,13) “Vulnerability should be considered in a broad context encompassing specific human, sociocultural, economic, environmental and political dimensions that relate to social inequalities based on age, gender, ethnicity and economic division”. While taking note of the multidimensional nature of vulnerability, this definition highlights the fact that during a disaster, some groups in a society become more prone to its affects than others.

Informed by the above theoretical background, three key informant interviews, one focus group discussion and five individual semi structured interviews with women were conducted. The methods employed fitted well with the research objective and were consistent with feminist methodologies. Recorded data were transcribed and coded for emerging themes during the analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

The findings discussed in this paper highlight the importance of examining pre-existing gendered vulnerability factors to hazards. The informants identified different types of pre-existing vulnerability factors. They were grouped in to four categories. In this paper two types of vulnerabilities will be discussed.

### *Socio Cultural Vulnerability*

As Tailevu’s life is centred on shared needs and communal living, and gender needs, roles and identities are defined by a social hierarchy. The traditional norm in the village does not give women an equal status with men. Women’s mobility outside the village is limited due to gender roles, therefore their knowledge of early warning and precaution measures before, during and after a hazard are also restricted. The social expectation of having large families makes women bear many children risking their health and increasing their responsibilities during and after a hazard. After the

cyclone women in the village were expected to look after the injured and children, cook for the villagers in the transition camps and were also expected to be responsible for providing a healthy environment for the family while putting themselves at risk.

Their contribution in economic decision-making is minimal due to gendered ideologies. Although women were powerful at the household level decision-making, they were hardly visible at the community level. During the focus group, it was understood that old women like to continue the traditional life style without challenging the 'order of the village'.

#### *Economic Vulnerability*

Women interviewed were mainly engaged in agriculture and fishing. They grew root crops, which satisfy their weekly food needs. The balance was sold in the market. Women planted these root crops on reserve land. They did not have direct access to communal land. During the focus group discussions women discussed how they were involved in fishing mainly for family consumption and sometimes to sell at the market. Even fishing comes under a customary fishing right, which is under the control of the tribal chief. Access to land and water resources for livelihood shows women's dependency, economic insecurity and their increased vulnerability after a hazard as access to natural resources is also through patrilineal means.

As a result of the cyclone, women lost all their agricultural crops and their economic means for survival were completely destroyed. This resulted in a drastic decline in their sources of income. The garden plots were severely affected after the cyclone challenging the possibility of subsistence farming in the foreseeable future. The cyclone also affected the locations women used to go fishing, threatening the household food security. Women were worried about their inability to ensure food security for their families. A few young and middle aged women in the village have already

started to work as house girls in the nearest town for a very low daily wage. Some expressed an interest in involving in non-agriculture related employment in the village. However they did not have any knowledge or capital to start a business. Some women were interested in restarting traditional craft making which was abandoned some decades before. In sum women's economic recovery after this cyclone could be expected to be challenging and slow.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of the study show that pre-existing vulnerabilities in the village in terms of socio cultural and economic aspects have escalated women's vulnerabilities after the cyclone. Gendered inequalities and related vulnerabilities were clear in the village in different domains, though they were not internalized by women in the village as an issue. During the fieldwork, it became very clearly that women did not want to dismantle the traditions and culture of the village as they value them. The research highlights how gender is a cross cutting theme in hazard impacts as vulnerabilities differ according to the social construction of men and women.

### **References**

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