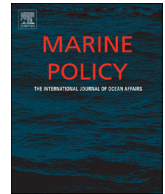




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Raising the voices of Pacific Island women to inform climate adaptation policies



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ABSTRACT

Policymakers and natural resource managers are increasingly recognizing the importance of broader geographic and gender participation in assessing climate vulnerability and developing effective adaptation policies. When such participation is limited, climate mitigation and adaptation policies may miss key opportunities to support vulnerable communities, and thus inadvertently reinforce the vulnerability of marginalized groups. This paper reports rich qualitative data from women leaders in conservation, development and climate adaptation projects to support local communities across seven Pacific Island nations. The results indicate the following priorities to support climate adaptation policies in the Pacific: (1) increased recognition for the importance of traditional knowledge; (2) greater support for local women's groups, including strategic planning and training to access climate finance mechanisms; and (3) climate policies that consider alternative metrics for women's empowerment and inclusion, formalize women's land rights, and provide land for climate refugees. Existing evidence is discussed which supports the importance of these priorities in the Pacific. Their input identifies research gaps in climate adaptation and provides important guidance for governments, non-governmental organizations, and development agencies leading climate adaptation efforts.

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1. Introduction

The Pacific Islands are on the front lines of climate change [33]. Often, they are characterized by perceived fragility, high vulnerability to climate change, and lack of adaptation options [53]. Such perspectives deny the agency of people at risk to define climate change in their own terms, to apply their own systems of knowledge, and to implement locally relevant solutions [7]. Specifically, the perspectives of Pacific Island women are not included in the extensive literature on climate change. Excluding the input of Pacific Island women results in less robust and equitable climate change programs and policies, and may miss the significant contributions of women. For example, women hold valuable traditional knowledge gained from their individual experiences adapting to environmental changes over generations [17]. Women also face equity and justice obstacles that prevent them from expressing, sharing, or applying their knowledge [16,24]. Therefore, gender is a key factor driving climate vulnerability and opportunities to respond (in addition to age, race, class, caste, indigeneity, and (dis)ability; [63]). Gender refers to the socially constructed roles and responsibilities of women and men. Specifically, it refers to “power relationships and the practices through which what is a ‘man’ or ‘woman’ get defined in different environmental contexts” [5]. Climate programs and policies, therefore, must consider and address such power relationships to support sustainable and resilient communities and ecosystems and to avoid exacerbating gender inequalities [48,56].

The lack of attention to the voices of Pacific Island women in climate research reflects a broader pattern of underrepresenting the importance of indigenous people,² gender, and traditional knowledge. Some researchers have criticized the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for prioritizing western science and technological solutions [2] and for underrepresenting indigenous issues: “the coverage is general in scope, limited in length... and the historical and contextual complexities of indigenous experiences are largely overlooked” ([20], p. 349). Similarly, gender and traditional knowledge are rarely explored in detail in climate research (e.g., [10,43]). A recent United Nations Women report discussing the interface between gender equity, climate change and disasters in the Pacific failed to mention traditional knowledge [23], despite its critical importance in the region [19]. The lack of research applying a gendered lens is noteworthy because traditional knowledge is itself gendered (e.g., due to different social roles, ethnicities, age, access to ecosystems, and gendered divisions of labor; [17]). Thus, there is an urgent need to explore the intersections between indigenous peoples, traditional knowledge, and gender as it relates to climate vulnerability and adaptation.

To contextualize the discussion, the gendered impacts of climate from across the globe and the importance of traditional knowledge and indigenous participation in adaptation are highlighted.

1.1. Gendered impacts of climate change around the world

Climate projects have been criticized for adversely impacting marginalized people, by undermining tenure rights, disempowering local decision making, and limiting local livelihoods in the name of conservation and development [38]. Recent work in agrarian settings highlights how gendered patterns of labor and responsibility produce differentiated (i.e., different members of a population experience and/or respond to the impacts of the same event differently; or are exposed to different events; [6,63]). For example, research in the Arctic and India highlights how climate change impacts have disrupted traditional male roles which have led to problems of male identity and loss of men's self-esteem contributing to alcoholism and higher suicide rates in some communities [55]. Research in Mali demonstrates how women's

workload increased as livelihoods shifted from water to forest-based systems [18]. Climate-induced droughts in Ethiopia and South Asia have led to women and children having to walk farther to get firewood and water [58], losing time that could be spent on education, income generation, or putting them at risk of violence [69]. In Vanuatu in 2011, following two tropical cyclones, a 300% increase in new domestic violence cases was reported [14], and research in Samoa showed that people displaced by disaster were at higher risks of gender-based violence than people who stayed in their communities [34]. Similarly, Bradshaw and Fordham [11] discuss how disasters may affect women and girls by leading to increases in violence, loss or reduction in education opportunities, and an increase in their workload. Thus, differences in vulnerabilities to climate change can drive increased violence against some women and girls, reduced opportunities for education, and increasing workloads for women, important aspects that are also reflected in the women's experiences below in the Pacific.

1.2. Importance of traditional knowledge and indigenous participation in adaptation

Indigenous peoples have declared that traditional knowledge is necessary for their cultural survival [44]. Indeed, research has highlighted the importance of indigenous knowledge for understanding climate change and informing adaptation (in the Arctic – e.g., [10,3]; Africa – e.g., [51,52]; and the Asia-Pacific region – e.g., [59,40,43]). Traditional knowledge, regarding how communities have responded to past natural disasters (e.g., droughts), can provide important information to address current and future climate risks [51]. Further, traditional knowledge involves constant learning-by-doing, experimenting and knowledge-building, thus, can adapt to meet changing climate and environmental conditions [9].

Much of the research on traditional knowledge and climate change has focused on the value of local weather and environmental change observations to complement large-scale climate projections [27], and shifting from the colonial view of indigenous communities as “passive victims” of climate change to recognizing their active role in leading adaptation efforts [59]. Despite such progress, some indigenous people suggest that climate solutions proposed by governments and NGOs may threaten their indigenous rights [39,57]. Prevailing biases in environmental policies can marginalize traditional knowledge [19,44] and reinforce the preeminence of science and western views of development, which do not adequately account for different perceptions of what success looks like for different stakeholders in terms of sustainable development [4].

To address these research gaps and explore how these issues are playing out in the Pacific, results from a workshop in Palau in 2017 are presented. The workshop brought together women from Pacific island nations to discuss how they are being affected by and responding to climate change. The paper explores their role in climate adaptation activities, constraints to their adaptation, and their recommendations for developing adaptation policies and projects that better represent their diversity of voices, needs, and priorities, rooted in their cultural contexts. It addresses a key data gap noted in the Pacific [65,60] by providing rich qualitative data on climate change impacts and adaptation from Pacific Island women; and highlights the intersections between indigenous peoples, traditional knowledge, and gender as it relates to climate vulnerability and adaptation.

2. Methods

The Nature Conservancy conducted a workshop from March 29–31st, 2017 in Palau, bringing together nineteen women from seven Pacific Island nations (Marshall Islands, Palau, Yap, Kosrae, Chuuk, Pohnpei, and Papua New Guinea; Fig. 1). The Nature Conservancy is an international conservation NGO that has been working with local partners to lead conservation projects in the region for over 20 years.

² Many Pacific Islanders do not consider themselves indigenous, and while there is no universally accepted definition of ‘indigenous,’ a key criterion is self-identification [68].

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