

Women's groups lead response to COVID-19 crisis

Fiji Regional

SHARE

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By Sheldon Chanel for *Pacific Women*.

Ensuring no one is left behind remains a priority with the COVID-19 response and early recovery efforts.

'As people with disabilities, the most critical thing was our safety and protection,' said Lanieta Tuimabu, Office Manager of the Fiji Disabled Peoples Federation.

Ms Tuimabu was one of four panellists discussing the impacts and challenges arising from the COVID-19 response and early recovery, at the Fiji Reflection and Learning Workshop held in Suva from 19–20 October.



Pictured are the discussion panellists with facilitator: (Left to right) Nalini Singh, Fiji Women's Rights Movement; Susan Grey, femLINKpacific; Tara Chetty, Pacific Women Support Unit (facilitator); Stephanie Dunn, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre; and Lanieta Tuimabu, Fiji Disabled People's Federation. Photo credit: Vilimaina Naqeleuvuki, Pacific Women Support Unit.

Stephanie Dunn of the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), also a panellist and workshop participant, commented: 'Before we confirmed our first case [of COVID-19 in Fiji], the women's movement was already in the front planning about what can be done to lessen the impact on women and girls in Fiji, and even for other groups.'

Women and girls in Fiji have shown great resourcefulness and resilience during the COVID-19 crisis, mobilising through their networks to call for inclusive response efforts.

The pandemic's social and economic impact has been profound throughout Fiji and the region. Recognising that a crisis of such magnitude required a collaborative effort and decisive response, women's and human rights groups were among the first to mobilise.

'As people with disabilities, the most critical thing was our safety and protection,' Ms Tuimabu said.

'When we had the first cases, one critical discussion was about access to information and making sure that people with disabilities were able to receive COVID messaging to better prepare themselves.'

The Australian Government provided funding support to the FDPF during the pandemic, through its partners the Australian Humanitarian Partnership, *Pacific Women* and the Fiji Women's Fund. This support was vital in keeping FDPF staff employed at a time of heightened need for efficient and effective service delivery to vulnerable groups.

In any large-scale crisis, girls, women and other marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities, usually feel the brunt of the impact.

According to UN Women, over 11 million girls across the globe may never return to school after COVID-19, further widening the gender gap and undoing decades of progress made towards gender equality.

There are similar concerns in Fiji, although a survey is needed to identify the full extent of the problem.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in the country, with women facing heightened risks of violence and economic hardships, according to the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM).

A 2017 report by the FWRM, *Balancing the Scales: Improving Women's Access to Justice*, revealed that women who have experienced violence take 868 days to seek assistance.

The FWRM's *Assessment of Women's Access to Justice in Fiji During COVID-19 Pandemic from January to May 2020* report also stated that: 'In times of crisis, such as this pandemic, this could be exacerbated due to the restrictions placed on people movement and the inability of women to leave the home or to escape from the perpetrator to report the violence.'

Additionally, two-thirds of women in the country have suffered some form of intimate partner violence, which is double the global average, according to surveys by the FWCC.

Ms Dunn, Legal Officer at the FWCC said the national helpline, 1560, received more than 400 calls from across Fiji, mostly related to domestic violence and other forms of abuse, during lockdown.

This recent surge is directly linked with COVID-19, said Fijian Minister for Women, Mereseini Vuniwaqa, during a workshop on *addressing domestic violence and gender justice during COVID-19* in September this year. Ms Vuniwaqa said that the national helpline had 87 calls in February, which grew to 187 in March and rose alarmingly to 527 in April, with 66% of the calls coming from women.

Another important area often ignored during a crisis, but no less important, is mental health.

Fijian Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama, announced in July that *more than 115,000 people were without jobs or on reduced hours in Fiji due to COVID-19*, while the country's central bank has *projected an economic decline of 21.7%* this year.



Pictured: Lanieta Matanatabu, Transcend Oceania's Research and Publications Officer.

In such an environment, the future is uncertain for many, leading to concerns about increased stress and growing mental health problems.

Transcend Oceania, a regional non-government organisation headquartered in Suva that receives support from Fiji Women's Fund, ran a 13-episode television show to address mental trauma and provide communities with a platform to express their views. Named *JustPeace Talanoa Bure @ COVID19*, the show was a unique way to reach out to communities at a time when movement was restricted.

'COVID brought about a lot of geographical restrictions for our organisation which made it difficult to carry out our work,' said Lanieta Matanatabu, Transcend Oceania's Research and Publications Officer.

'We were able to strategise on how to work smart during that time. Instead of going out, we were able to bring people together and create a platform for them on national television.'

These approaches have shown that a coordinated, collaborative and compassionate approach to crisis response can lead to meaningful and lasting change.

‘2020 has been a very challenging year for all of us, particularly for women and their organisations working to support communities through this crisis,’ said Tara Chetty, Partnerships Lead of *Pacific Women’s* Support Unit. ‘These women have been carrying this heavy load for many months now.’

‘The Fiji Reflection Workshop has been not just a moment to pause and reflect on these many challenges and prepare for further difficulties ahead, but also to acknowledge and celebrate our resilience.’

The annual workshop was held this year for the fourth time, bringing together 100 people from almost 40 Australian Government-supported initiatives that receive funding from *Pacific Women* and the Fiji Women’s Fund.