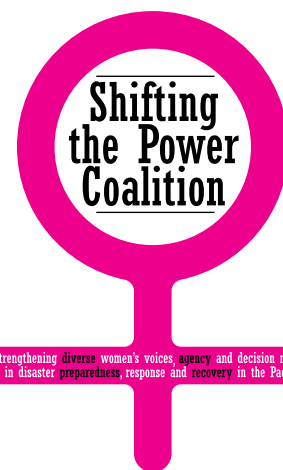


# Shifting the Power Together

Pacific  
Women-Led  
Responses to  
COVID-19



# The Shifting the Power Coalition: Strengthening and Localising “Women’s Leadership and Disability Inclusion in Humanitarian Action”

The Pacific is experiencing multiple challenges – from intensifying cyclones, droughts and floods as a result of the climate crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic and its long term impacts. Ensuring sustainable responses requires a new way of driving inclusion in line with commitments from Pacific Leaders, such as the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration and the Revised Pacific Platform for Action for Gender Equality and Women’s Human Rights.

The Shifting the Power Coalition (STP Coalition) was established in 2016, learning from and building on women’s leadership in response to Tropical Cyclone (TC) Pam in Vanuatu in 2015 and TC Winston in Fiji in 2016. It brings together 13 women-led civil society organisations in seven Pacific Forum countries working together to support diverse women’s leadership in humanitarian action at local, national and regional levels.

We are the only women-led regional alliance focused on strengthening the collective power, influence and leadership of diverse Pacific women to respond to disasters and climate change. We focus on strengthening women’s capacity to engage in policy and decision making, driving evidence-based and women-led innovations from the region, as well as engaging in national and regional advocacy.

“As a result of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, there is increased economic insecurity among women. Those who rely on an income from small informal markets are unable to make a living. This is one of the root causes of the violence they then face in their homes. Single mothers and young entrepreneurs are also facing financial problems because they have either been laid off or just cannot run their small businesses.”  
– Helena Seneka, YWCA of Papua New Guinea

The STP Coalition is committed to ensure diverse Pacific women’s voices, agency and decision-making informs disaster preparedness, response and recovery as well as humanitarian response at all levels. We draw on our collective work in community mobilisation, peacebuilding, young women’s leadership, women’s rights and disability inclusion. Together, we are driving a transformative agenda during crisis situations that will tackle power and gender relations over the longer term by demonstrating diverse women’s capabilities and leadership. ActionAid Australia, as a women’s rights-focused humanitarian organisation, supports Coalition partners to engage in the humanitarian system.

“Shifting the Power is amplifying the voices of women with disabilities at all levels and empowering women with disabilities to advocate on the challenges they face in different spaces of leadership and decision making. It is making change for an inclusive society”  
- Lanieta Tuimabu, Fiji Disabled People’s Federation

The STP Coalition is demonstrating how to support the localisation of women-led responses as well as integrating the specific recommendations of young women and women with disabilities, as well as women from rural communities.

“As a Shifting the Power Coalition focal point, I would like to support women and girls’ access to safe spaces that also enable them to access updated information on humanitarian support and work together with local networks and partners to sustain this movement”  
- Taimalelagi Ramona Tugaga, YWCA Samoa and Chairperson Le Teine Crisis Center Trust

# Enabling Flexible Feminist Crisis Funding in the Pacific

In the midst of the 2019-2020 cyclone season, the COVID-19 pandemic placed an unprecedented burden on the health, social and economic systems of Pacific Island Countries (PICs). The Shifting the Power Coalition recognised that the pandemic would deepen gender inequality and poverty as women's jobs and livelihoods were severely impacted and we began to receive reports of increasing domestic violence.

“ Some of our women are dealing with six crises currently – COVID-19, drought, scarcity of potable water, volcanic ash, acid rain and sulphur gas as we have several active volcanoes.”  
– Flora Vano, ActionAid Vanuatu Country Programme Manager (interview with IPS)

That is one of the reasons why the Shifting the Power Coalition Emergency Grant mechanism has been established. With the support of DFAT's Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development programme, the Shifting the Power Coalition: Strengthening Diverse Women's Leadership in Humanitarian Action project is managing a crisis grant pool of funds for its partners. This provides a much-needed avenue for Coalition members to quickly access funds and continue to drive accountability to women's rights in disaster management and crisis response.

The Shifting the Power Coalition emergency grants are available to Coalition members who can apply for up to 5000 AUD to enable women-led, fast and locally-driven action, with a particular focus on addressing gender equality and disability rights in humanitarian action. An emergency grant can support an immediate and rapid, short-term response to a significant humanitarian disaster or emergency through the following actions: *Local women's leadership*



*in emergency response e.g. undertaking baseline assessments; Increased human resource capacity; Enhanced communications between women's organisations and affected communities; and Women-led responses targeting the specific needs and protection of diverse women in the response.*

This means partners can quickly organise at the community, local and national level to take the lead in ensuring that the needs and interests of diverse women and girls are addressed in long-term response and recovery efforts.

From December 2019 to July 2020, a total of 36,500 AUD was disbursed to 7 Coalition partners in response to the Samoa measles epidemic, COVID-19 and the Tropical Cyclone Harold emergency response. The next phase of the emergency grant roll-out is to support medium and long-term recovery in response to COVID-19 as well as provide access to funds during cyclone season 2020/2021.

# Enhancing Feminist Collaboration:

In crisis situations, collaboration is vital. This is one of the reasons why the Shifting the Power Coalition was established. Since 2016, Coalition partners have been working together to bring about change so that humanitarian action does not regard women as vulnerable beneficiaries but rather builds on our indigenous and localised knowledge. The Coalition enables resources – including the time and space to meet – to reach us – when we need it – so we can deliberate, participate, design and deliver what works for diverse women and our communities. It is focused on supporting women's leadership in preparing for and responding to disasters and climate change.

**In 2020, the Coalition continued to demonstrate an important Pacific women-led south-south collaboration that focuses on**

**a) shared learning and mutual capacity development;**

**b) resourcing of locally-led emergency response;**

**c) supporting our innovations in early warning and protection; and**

**d) collective engagement in regional and national disaster planning.**

- **In Fiji, Transcend Oceania supported the Fiji Disabled People's Federation to document and distribute emergency relief packs in Vanua Levu.**
- **In Vanuatu a first ever women-led Rapid Needs Assessment was led by Shifting the Power Coalition partners, ActionAid Vanuatu (AAV), Vanuatu Young Women for Change (VYWC), and Vanuatu Disability Promotion & Advocacy Association. This provided a safe space for women to share firsthand how TC Harold brought destruction to**

**their communities, as well as provide recommendations for a localized response that will put protection of their safety and dignity at its centre.**

- **The Coalition is resourcing focal point positions in each of the 6 countries, with additional gender and disability focal points positioned in Vanuatu and Fiji. This is about resourcing partners to engage in the Coalition's common agenda and ensuring a strong network to support advocacy, communications and national-level engagement. There are now 11 focal points in operation who work closely with the STP Coalition Technical Adviser. This enabled rapid data gathering and the sharing of information across the Coalition during TC Harold and COVID**

ActionAid Australia as an equal partner in the Coalition ensures, as a women's rights focused humanitarian organisation, that Coalition members are supported to engage in the multiple complexities and navigate the humanitarian system. ActionAid Australia also plays a critical role supporting financial management, compliance and risk management, bringing humanitarian expertise and targeted capacity support for Coalition, facilitating transparent sharing and collective decision making around budgets so that Coalition members can prioritise where investments can make the best impact.

We have a Secretariat and technical advice and support readily available so that Coalition leadership and focal points including young women and women with disabilities have the support to meet, deliberate and operationalise community mobilisation in humanitarian engagement. A Fiji based Technical Adviser, brings the experience and expertise from the Pacific women's movement to support coordination, forging strategic partnerships with other humanitarian actors and allies in the region.

# Safety & Protection with Dignity

“ According to the women I have interviewed, they are more aware about the gender dimensions of prevention and protection messages while following information on the national response. One challenge faced by women during crises is the need for safe havens where they can access information, advice and assistance. [That] is an important space for women and girls to be free from sexual and gender-based violence.”

- Taimalelagi Ramona Tugaga YWCA Samoa – Rise Up Consultant and General Secretary Samoa; Le Teine Crisis Center Trust – Co-Founder and Program Coordinator

The Shifting the Power Coalition believes that protection is vital in all stages of disaster and crisis response: early warning and preparedness, during response as well as throughout the recovery phase/post crisis.

Safety and Protection with Dignity means:

- **Women of all diversities are supported to assess protection risks facing women and their communities and identify community led solutions to address these risks.**
- **There is assessment of the vulnerability of different groups of women, recognising that a one-size fits all approach is not sufficient.**
- **Women are able to build upon the existing capacity of the community to protect themselves and the most vulnerable because they can access available services and collective advocate for identified gaps.**

With support from Action Aid Australia, Coalition partners have been supported to develop and implement a Women-Led Community-Based Protection (WLCBP) approach in humanitarian response which builds on local women's strengths, knowledge and experience.

It recognises women's capability to drive their protection, identifying problems and solutions and creating community-based support structures that can better protect women's rights in times of crisis.

It is a feminist, human rights-based model seeking to build women's individual and collective power, transform systems and structures, and strengthen access to rights, services and resources.

# How to Use the Case Studies

This handbook can help you support diverse women in your network to learn from Pacific women's leadership and initiatives to develop your own local and national strategies to put women's leadership and rights at the centre of humanitarian response.

Here are some terms that are good to understand:

## **What are protection risks?**

- **Violence or threat of violence – the act or threat of physical/psychological abuse or economic violence**
- **Coercion/exploitation – forcing people to do things against their will; taking advantage of positions of power**
- **Deprivation/neglect – preventing people from accessing goods, services or resources they need to survive and thrive. Can be deliberate or unintentional, direct or indirect and includes discrimination**

## **Understanding protection risks**

- **Pre-existing – problems that exist independent of, or prior to, emergency/disaster/conflict**
- **Emergency-related – problems caused by/resulting from the disaster or conflict**
- **Humanitarian-induced protection problems – problems caused directly by humanitarian response or indirectly by inappropriate, 'protection-blind' interventions and assistance**

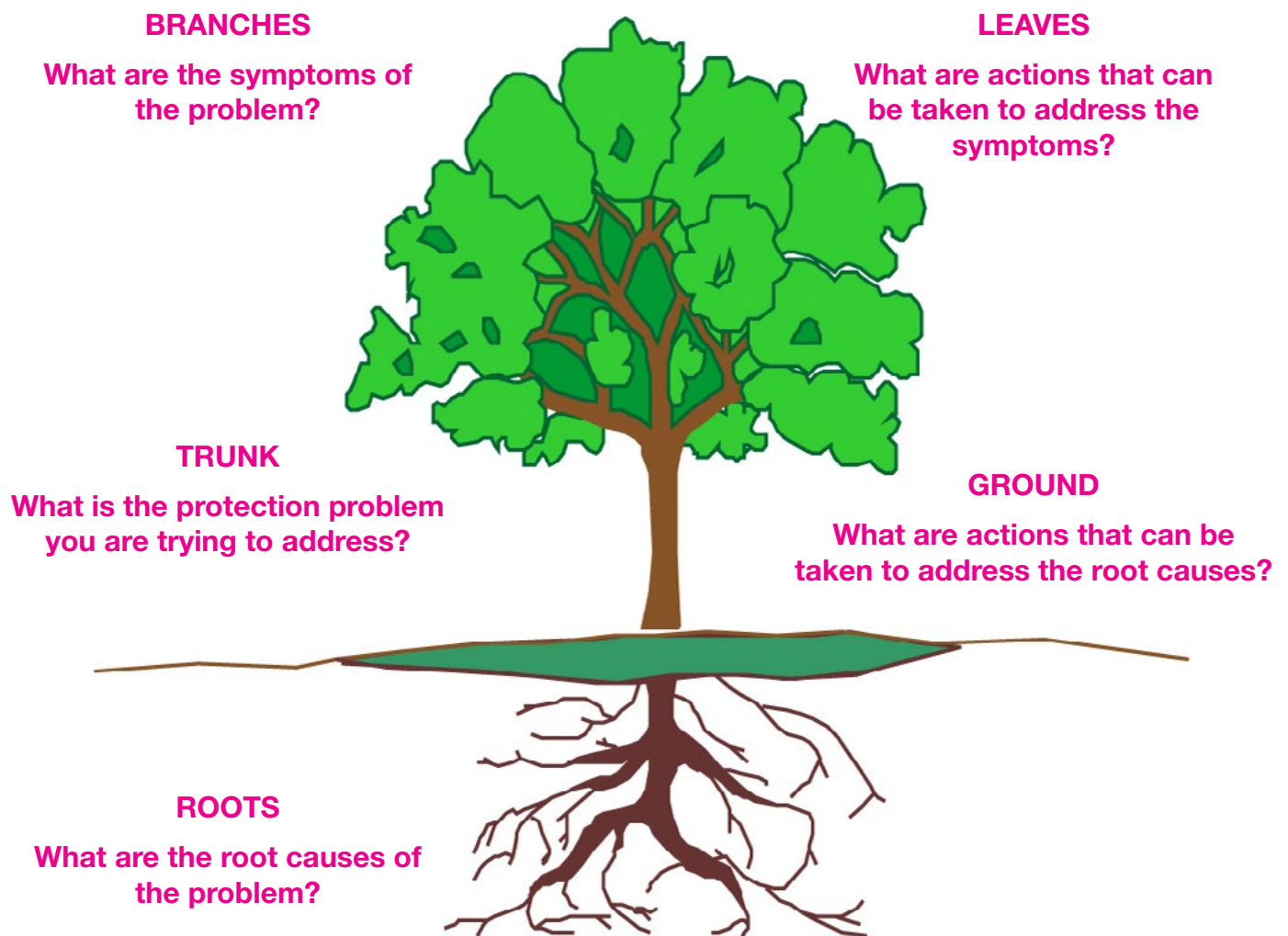
## **Discussion:**

Use these guiding questions to analyse the threats experienced by women in the case study: What caused the problem or harm? Who contributed to it? Why do they do it?

Use these guiding questions to address vulnerabilities: Who is likely to experience or suffer from the problem? Why are they vulnerable? When are they most at risk? (Time of the day, certain times of the year etc.); Where are they most vulnerable (e.g. near the house, near the market or well, on the way to school).

# Developing a Community Based Protection Plan

Now discuss the lives of women and girls in your communities and develop a Protection Plan using the Problem Tree below.



# Case Study 1: Disability Inclusion

An emergency grant to the Fiji Disabled People's Federation (FDPF) is catalysing the leadership of rural women with disabilities on Fiji's second island of Vanua Levu.

As a result of an emergency grant of 5000 AUD the FDPF mobilised to undertake protection assessments and provide 33 women between the ages of 18 - 60 years in 26 settlements in the provinces of Macuata and Cakaudrove with the first emergency care packs to directly reach these women and their families.

The FDPF Northern Safety and Protection assessments highlighted the lack of accessible COVID-19 protection and prevention messages reaching members of the FDPF.

Access to information is a very important tool in our everyday life. I would suggest the inclusive disability communication guidelines for persons with disability whereby are they able to access the right information in different forms. With the use of Braille for the blind, also, the sign language interpreters. We are so happy that finally mainstream media are able to use sign language interpreters in all their updates and coverage," said Jay Nasilasila of the FDPF who coordinated the rural outreach.

**“ Many of the women with disabilities had little or no knowledge on the virus and how they protect themselves,” said Tuimabu, highlighting the ongoing challenge of receiving information and communication in accessible formats.**

The baseline assessment found that women with disabilities also faced further rising economic insecurities as family members lost jobs or began working reduced hours. While some of the members receive a monthly Social Welfare allowance, their family and primary caregivers are struggling to make ends meet for the rest of the family.



**“ There has been fear regarding the transmission of COVID-19 as well as the loss of jobs and income in families. Several of the young women mentioned that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic it was hard to secure employment even with qualifications because of their disabilities. Things will be harder now,” explained Jay Nasilasila who undertook the initial assessment.**

Priority issues identified from the assessment and interviews during distribution were food security, hygiene and sanitation, accessible information on COVID-19 prevention and protection.

**“ We also have to address how to support family and caregivers as most of these women are not employed and are receiving Social Welfare support on a monthly basis. Due to the pandemic, most family members lost their jobs or have reduced hours of working that has added more stress to the family in terms of food security and livelihood. The emergency care packs were timely to support women with disabilities and their families during this difficult times when there is also heightened stress in the families.”**

The collaboration in the field between FDPF and Transcend Oceania builds on the intervention of the STP Coalition Women's Leaderships and Disability Inclusion in Humanitarian Action workshop, in Vanua Levu in August 2020, where Jay identified the poor health infrastructure and the vulnerability of women with disabilities in rural communities.



# Case Study 2:

## Women-led Innovation in a Time of Crisis - Vanuatu

As the global COVID-19 pandemic brought lockdowns to Pacific Island countries, women in Vanuatu took the response into their own hands to develop the first national public health message about the virus.

On 13 March 2020, members of Women Wetem Weta (Women's Weather Watch or WWW) worked closely with the Vanuatu Ministry of Health (MoH) to develop an SMS in the local language Bislama.

The message, in simple non-technical language, was sent to more than 77,148 people on five islands across the Digicel mobile network – directly reaching more than one-quarter of the Vanuatu population.

Since then, the Vanuatu team have held train-the-trainer workshops for women community leaders with the MoH focused on COVID-19 prevention and response. Women involved in the Women I Tok Tok Tugeta (Women Talking Together) network, supported by ActionAid, have been raising awareness about COVID-19 in communities and demonstrating effective hygiene measures.



# Case Study 3:

## Feminist Collaboration Leads to a First Joint Localised Humanitarian Response in Vanuatu

“ TC Harold really made a big damage. The elderly and people with disabilities are still living in evacuation centers. There are no thatch leaves to rebuild their homes. There’s a shortage of tarpaulins. While some churches leaders are urging them to return to their homes but where will they go? Nothing is left for them to survive. So many challenges faced by people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.”

This was the situation facing the Shifting the Power Coalition Emergency Response Team from Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association (VDPA), Vanuatu Young Women for Change (VYWC) and ActionAid Vanuatu (AAV) as they undertook the first ni-Vanuatu women-led response following TC Harold.

Border closures because of COVID-19 meant there were no international humanitarian actors arriving, and so with the support of ActionAid Australia, women leaders deployed to deliver emergency response and conduct Rapid Needs Assessments (RNA).

The assessments provided a safe space for women to share firsthand how TC Harold brought destruction to their communities, as well as provide recommendations for a localised response that is putting protection of their safety and dignity at its centre. Women shared that it was the first time they were consulted in a disaster response.



# Case Study 4: Women's Economic Security and Protection

Stories of despair, violence and confusion have been transformed to stories of hope and building economic security following the impact of COVID-19 and TC Harold on the local economy in Vanuatu as well as ensuring the safety and protection of young women.

According to Anne Pakoa, the Technical Adviser of Vanuatu Young Women for Change (VYWC), the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, in addition to devastation caused by TC Harold, is having the hardest impact on small-scale women-led businesses:

“ **Some of these girls and young women have been forced into prostitution just to make a living for themselves and their families. We thought we were feeding families, but the food items are changing lives! Our record shows that we have been able to reach 3,000 families in Santo and Malo island and 5,000 families in Port Vila including some villages in North Efate and peri-urban areas of Port Vila such as Etas and Teoma.**”

VYWC was able to access a rapid response grant through the Shifting the Power Coalition emergency grant programme that the Coalition set up as part of its funding from the DFAT-supported Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development programme. The money translated into life-saving supplies to women in Luganville and Malo who were severely affected by the impact of category 5 TC Harold. It has also catalysed economic security programmes for young women, single mothers and women with disabilities living in the urban and peri-urban communities of Port Vila and North Efate.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions on the urban kava bars (nakamals), VYWC organised to provide young women and girls with rice, flour and biscuits. These young women had relied on



selling small items in the bars for their survival but were not able to benefit from the Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF) COVID-19 relief package as they are not in the formal economy.

“ **Our members were living on the edge. We wanted to feed the children. We wanted our members to be able to purchase sanitary pads when they need it. We wanted our members and their families to eat a daily balanced diet. We wanted them to have a mask available to wear it when they need it,**” explained Sabrina Brown, the CEO of the young women-led organisation.

The emergency grant is having a ripple effect within the families reached while shining a light on how economic security and livelihood programmes for young women and girls can empower them to build resilience in the face the current challenges.

# Case Study 5:

## Young Women Gear Up to Influence Disaster Management and Humanitarian Action – Tonga

“ Young women are facing the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 due to border closures affecting family income as many families rely on remittances,” said Talitha Project’s founder and Executive Director, Vanessa Heleta.

While Tonga is yet to report a case of COVID-19, 12 young women from the Talitha Project had the opportunity to reflect on the impact of border closures on their lives and shared their experiences of TC Gita in 2018 and TC Harold as part of training funded under the Shifting the Power Coalition. They mapped out community disaster management systems, discussed ways to enhance Safety and Protection measures and appointed a Humanitarian Focal Point who will be driving national organising efforts under the Shifting the Power Coalition.

“ This is very timely as we get closer to the 2020/2021 cyclone season. The participants have their experiences from TC Gita and TC Harold and we are supporting them to provide their recommendations on how disaster management and humanitarian action can be more disability inclusive,” said Heleta.

The workshop also helped young women to understand national disaster management and how humanitarian coordination mechanisms operate, as well as identify ways they could creatively and proactively influence and engage with these actors.



Moana Kioa, the Deputy CEO of the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) spoke about Protection in Humanitarian Action and the importance of strengthening protection in Disaster Risk Reduction, stressing the importance of emergency response agencies integrating a in the relief and recovery efforts.

# Case Study 6:

## Linking Rural Young Women to Information-Communication Systems

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# Case Study 7: Disability Inclusion

On 6 April 2020, 22-year-old Frianna Kwevira and 66-year-old Rota Manley tracked TC Harold via radio and internet updates from their homes in Luganville, the main centre on the island of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu. Meanwhile 55-year-old Constan Noline Lerig, and 19-year-old Ladonna Tasso, who both have intellectual disabilities, did not have access to early warning information.

According to [humanitarianresponse.info](https://humanitarianresponse.info) at least 112,000 people were exposed to strong winds of up to 120 km/hour. It is not clear from these reports what percentage are women, including women and girls with disabilities. It was this wind that brought down trees and ripped the iron roof from Frianna's home. Born with one functioning hand, she gathered her children and sprinted to the safety of their neighbours where they remained knowing that their home and belongings were damaged and food garden destroyed. Constan and her husband's rundown shelter made from old roofing iron and timber did not stand a chance in the cyclone. As Constan recalls she could not find a clear path to run to safety. They found shelter with a neighbour who also provided dry clothes.

Rota, who relies on a wheelchair, evacuated early to a neighbour's house and stayed there until it was safe to return home. Her husband had to clear a pathway through the fallen trees. She was thankful that her home, which is not a permanent structure, was not badly damaged.

In the midst of the cyclone, Ladonna was injured. While several neighbours provided temporary shelter, it was the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association (VDPA) that arranged for a new home to be built. Constan and Frianna are still homeless. Frianna and her family continued to rely on the goodwill of their neighbours until emergency assistance in the form of tarpaulin, blankets, seeds, household items and food supplies arrived a month after that fateful night. They both lack resources to



construct new homes which can provide secure shelter during future cyclones. Ladonna and her mother missed out on the distribution of food supplies which took place the very day they had gone to their food garden in Fanafo village. All they were able to secure was a bag of rice.

Six months after TC Harold, the Pacific is preparing for the 2020/2021 cyclone season. For women with disabilities like Frianna and their families, unemployment and economic insecurities continue to be a cause of concern.

# Shifting the Power Coalition recommendations

The Shifting the Power Coalition report Mobilising Women's Leadership: Solutions for Protection and Recovery in a Time of COVID-19 and TC Harold presents recommendations drawn from across our network of women leaders and focal points, including young women and women with disabilities, across six Pacific Island countries.

“ Women apply an intentional gender lens to the design of fiscal stimulus packages and social assistance programmes to achieve greater equality and social protection. There must a gender audit on the impact of COVID-19.”  
– Online survey respondent.

Drawing on our strong community networks and lived experience, the report's intent is to inform and drive localised, women-led recovery efforts in the immediate to medium-term through organised advocacy and the provision of gender responsive services. As the Coalition found with the Samoa measles epidemic (2019) and now with COVID-19, gender inequalities influence access to healthcare, resources, and information, all of which play a role in prevention, early intervention, and treatment.

**Recommendation 1:** Women's rights are non-negotiable in COVID-19 response programming. Commitments to women's rights and disability inclusion, including the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Pacific Platform for Action for Gender Equality and Women's Rights, must be integrated in prevention, early intervention and

response, as well as long term recovery efforts such as the Boe Declaration Action Plan.

**Recommendation 2:** The Coalition recommends a multi-stakeholder process that ensures Pacific women's rights and feminist organisations and networks provide gender oversight and analysis to the PHP and national response and recovery measures.

**Recommendation 3:** The Coalition amplifies the call for increased funding and capacity development to local and national women's groups as equal partners in humanitarian action with targeted and direct support through both development and humanitarian programming.

**Recommendation 4:** The Coalition calls for dedicated funding for a localised, women-led approach to protection from gender-based violence.

**Recommendation 5:** The Coalition, alongside the Pacific Disability Forum, urges all levels of government, agencies, health ministries and the private sector throughout the Pacific to work with Disabled Peoples' Organisations (DPOs) to ensure that people with disabilities, in particular women, children and young people with disabilities are not left behind in the COVID-19 response.

**Recommendation 6:** The Coalition calls for dedicated funding for women-led livelihood and food security programmes that can support a gender transformative approach that increases women's access to resources.



## The Shifting the Power Coalition

addresses the critical barriers to inclusive humanitarian action and disaster management:

The institutional marginalisation and exclusion of women in decision-making spaces on humanitarian action and broader security debates;

The absence of diverse women's voices and experiences informing inclusive disaster planning, response and recovery; and

The increased threat of protection risks facing women, which are particularly acute in remote and rural communities with limited access to timely and relevant information and services.

To find out more visit:

W: <https://actionaid.org.au/programs/shifting-the-power-coalition/>

F: <https://www.facebook.com/shiftingthepowercoalition>



Since September 2019 the Shifting the Power Coalition has been a member of the Feminist Humanitarian Network

**The Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN)** is a global network of women's leaders committed to a transformed humanitarian system that promotes a feminist agenda. Its membership is comprised of women's right organisations and networks driving change in humanitarian contexts in the global South, INGOs and individuals.