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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[7 February 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



Protecting Women's And Girl's Enjoyment Of Human Rights In The Aftermath Of Climate-Induced Disasters In The Pacific Region

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) welcomes the report of High Commissioner for Human Rights, to be tabled during the 49th Regular Session of the UN Human Rights Council, addressing the promotion, protection, and respect of women's and girl's full enjoyment of human rights in humanitarian situations.

This statement is primarily based on information provided by the Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition, Homes of Hope Fiji, and Pacificwin, all grassroots organisations that work to combat contemporary forms of slavery and its underlying causes in Vanuatu, Fiji, and neighbouring Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). These organisations are members of the CHRI-founded Commonwealth 8.7 Network,[i] a group of 69 civil society organisations from across the globe that share a common vision to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking in line with SDG Target 8.7.

CLIMATE CHANGE

We appreciate the High Commissioner's report, which recognises the links between climate change, humanitarian crises, and their related displacements, which often have disparate impacts on women and girls. In the wake of disaster, women are restricted by stereotypical gender roles and are therefore often unable to prioritise their own safety due to caretaking duties or obligations to follow the relocation instructions of male family members. Without control over their own movement, women are more likely to be forced into unsafe locations or situations, rendering them more vulnerable to exploitation or abuse.

Climate change and related natural disasters are a major concern in PICTs, as was recently reflected by the devastating volcanic eruption in Tonga on 15 January 2022.[ii] As sea levels continue to rise, tsunamis similar to that caused by this eruption will only be exacerbated and pushed further inland, greatly increasing risks of damage.[iii] Therefore, in addition to the human rights-based approach recommended by the High Commissioner for promoting, protecting and respecting women's and girls' rights throughout the humanitarian programming cycle, we strongly urge concerted efforts to curb the negative impacts of climate change, with a particular focus on the Pacific region.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

We note the High Commissioner highlights gender-based violence as one of the many potential human rights atrocities experienced by women and girls in humanitarian situations. PICTs are especially vulnerable to increased incidents of gender-based violence in the aftermath of natural disasters.[iv] The Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition noted an increased number of reported cases of sexual harassment and exploitation of women and girls in evacuation centers following natural disasters. Pacificwin also noted that in least developed and under-developed PICTs, it is particularly difficult to seek protection from exploitative conditions and abuse due to a lack of infrastructure, including a shortage of roads and bridges linking remote areas to major towns. This isolation is aggravated by natural disasters, which destroy already limited channels of transport and, by extension, further limit routes for escaping abuse.[v]

ECONOMIC SECURITY

We appreciate the High Commissioner's analysis of how gender-based discrimination undermines the ability of women and girls to build and maintain economic security during or following humanitarian crises. Evidence suggests that climate change increases instances of poverty,[vi] and women and girls are more likely to experience this poverty.[vii] Sudden onset natural disasters can destroy homes, livelihoods, businesses, and even cause the deaths

of family members, leaving individuals in desperate need of necessities. Caretaking duties, traditionally allocated to women, means that the responsibility of securing food and protecting children in the wake of a humanitarian crisis, often falls to women and girls.[viii]

Traffickers are aware of acute financial vulnerabilities following natural disasters and use these events opportunistically.[ix] Homes of Hope Fiji has found that, following climate disaster evacuations, many women are targeted by traffickers at or near emergency shelters.[x] Inhabitants of displacement camps or evacuation shelters can not only become targets for traffickers, but they may also resort to collusion with traffickers in order to earn money during times of crisis, thereby placing their family members in peril.[xi] Homes of Hope Fiji noted that exploitation can often take place within families during times of desperation to secure food or shelter. Pacificwin noted that, in the worst examples, women and girls are traded for necessities during times of crisis.

SOLUTIONS IN THE PACIFIC CONTEXT

Despite documented evidence that climate change and disaster impacts are gendered, the Pacific region's progress towards gender equality and empowerment of women in the context of natural disasters is lagging.[xii] As of 2016, 80% of Pacific Island countries and territories had gender-blind national disaster legislation.[xiii] The Pacific needs gender responsive disaster response policies alongside increased technical and financial support from the international community.

Civil society organisations, especially those run by women, are key service providers following disasters and therefore must be given space and resources to participate in shaping policies on climate change and disaster risk reduction.[xiv] In Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Climate Action Network (VCAN) and other organisations are directly involved in drafting the government's climate change and disaster risk reduction policy. Their involvement has helped ensure that the needs of vulnerable groups, including women, youth, children, and persons with disabilities are addressed in the Government policy.[xv] The Women's Weather Watch programme in Vanuatu is also providing women in remote areas access to timely information and building their capacity to communicate information from the Meteorological Department because they know women are the first responders for many families and communities.[xvi]

Despite the turbulence of political instability, an international pandemic, and the devastation of climate change, the resilience of Pacific peoples is noteworthy. The region continues to prioritise and lead on environmental protection, which they understand is intrinsically related to the protection of women and girls. Civil society will continue to protect the most vulnerable, but they must be adequately resourced to ensure their effectiveness and continued compliance with good cultural practices. The Pacific Region needs international financial and technical support, in addition to global solidarity in the fight against climate change.

In that light, we recommend the following to States and intergovernmental agencies:

1. Dedicate resources to a regional anti-human trafficking mechanism in the Pacific.
2. Prioritise efforts to address climate change across the globe and increase support to Pacific Island countries and territories that are most impacted by the negative impacts of environmental disasters and degradation.
3. Fund and support infrastructure and rebuilding projects in Pacific Island countries and territories to safeguard and increase transportation and access between towns and rural areas.
4. Sustainably fund National Action Plans on eradicating child labour and human trafficking and allocate greater funding and support to CSOs and NGOs that are integral to meaningfully realising these strategies.
5. Reassess disaster risk reduction strategies and legislation to take a gender-sensitive approach and take proactive steps towards ensuring that evacuation

centres and informal settlements and facilities therein are safe for women and girls.

[i] See generally, <https://www.commonwealth-87.org/>.

[ii] In Tonga, a volcano-triggered tsunami underscores islands' acute climate risk, Reuters, 20 Jan. 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/cop/tonga-volcano-triggered-tsunami-underscores-islands-acute-climate-risk-2022-01-20/>.

[iii] Id.

[iv] Climate change disasters and gender-based violence in the Pacific, UN Women, 2014, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/>.

[v] Eradicating Modern Slavery: An assessment of Commonwealth governments' progress on achieving SDG Target 8.7, Walk Free and CHRI, 2020, <https://cdn.walkfree.org/Walk-Free-Eradicating-Modern-Slavery.pdf>.

[vi] Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, 2014, SPM 2.3 <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/>.

[vii] Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, UN Women Expert Group Meeting, 11 – 14 October 2021, EGM/ENV/EP.8, p 3, https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/66/EGM/Expert%20Papers/Cate%20OWREN_CS66%20Expert%20Paper.pdf.

[viii] Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience, World Bank, 2021, Section 2, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35202/Gender-Dimensions-of-Disaster-Risk-and-Resilience-Existing-Evidence.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

[ix] The perfect storm: the impact of disaster severity on internal human trafficking, A. Gurung, A.D. Clark, International Area Studies Review, 21 (4) (2018), pp. 302-322.

[x] Are Natural Disasters Linked to Human Trafficking?, Homes of Hope, 2021, <https://www.hopefiji.org/post/are-natural-disasters-linked-to-forced-sex>.

[xi] Ibid.

[xii] Climate change disasters and gender-based violence in the Pacific, UN Women, 2014, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/>.

[xiii] Ibid.

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Ibid.

[xvi] How Some Pacific Women are Responding to Climate Change and Natural Disasters, Inter Press Service, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/how-some-pacific-women-are-responding-climate-change-and-natural-disasters>.