



# Moving with Dignity: Women Leading Fiji's Climate Adaptation Journey

February 2026

The Global Programme Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change II supports Fiji in shaping a future of dignified, inclusive, and gender-responsive relocation.

**H**heavy rains and floods struck Fiji's main island of Viti Levu in January 2012. On the 26th, the highlands could no longer hold back the water. The earth turned to mud and then, the mud began to move. A massive landslide devastated the Tukuraki village area, killing a family, destroying homes, cutting off water supplies, and rendering roads impassable.

After years of reconstruction and relocation efforts, a new village site was opened in 2017. Nina Sikiti, from Fiji's Relocation Unit in the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, recalls this process as an example of why considering gender is essential in relocation work.

"When the Tukuraki community was initially relocated following the landslip disaster, the new homes were designed as open-plan structures without separate kitchens or bedrooms," she explains.

In traditional iTaukei villages - "iTaukei" being the Fijian term for the Indigenous Fijian people, meaning "owners of the land" - women are primarily responsible for caregiving and food preparation.

Given the design of the new houses, "they often had to build separate outdoor kitchens, and the lack of bedrooms raised privacy concerns," Sikiti says

It's only one of many examples that highlights why a gender lens is crucial in relocation processes. Sikiti emphasizes that Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) considerations must hold weight in every decision.

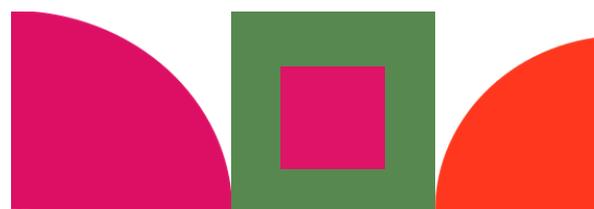
## Fiji's Challenge for the 21st Century

"In Fiji, the reality of climate change is not a distant threat - it is already reshaping lives, homes, and futures," says Paulo Baleinakorodawa, Executive Director of Transcend Oceania, an NGO working to advance sustainable peace and development across the Pacific. "Rising seas, stronger storms, destructive floods, and saltwater intrusion are forcing many communities to consider relocation."

For Fiji's low-lying and coastal settlements, climate-related mobility has become a defining challenge of the twenty-first century. A number of communities, such as Vunidogoloa,

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Yaro Village on Kia Island, Fiji, was devastated by Tropical Cyclone Yasa in 2020

Narikoso, and Tukuraki, have already been relocated as a result of climate impacts. Others are preparing for the same path.

Despite Fiji's strong mitigation and adaptation efforts, planned relocation has become, in many cases, the only viable long-term strategy to protect lives and livelihoods. The country stands among the first globally to embed relocation within national law through the Climate Change Act 2021 and its Planned Relocation Guidelines. These frameworks acknowledge that moving a community is not a purely technical exercise.

“Relocation is never just about geography, it is about culture, identity, and relationships,” Baleinakorodawa says.

From coastal villages threatened by rising tides to highland communities destabilized by floods and landslides, Fijians are confronting decisions that touch the core of who they are and where they belong.

In these processes, gender roles and social norms, who speaks, who decides, and who carries the daily burden of change, play a decisive part. As Baleinakorodawa explains: “Behind every decision to move - or to stay - are deeply gendered realities that shape resilience, vulnerability, and voice.”

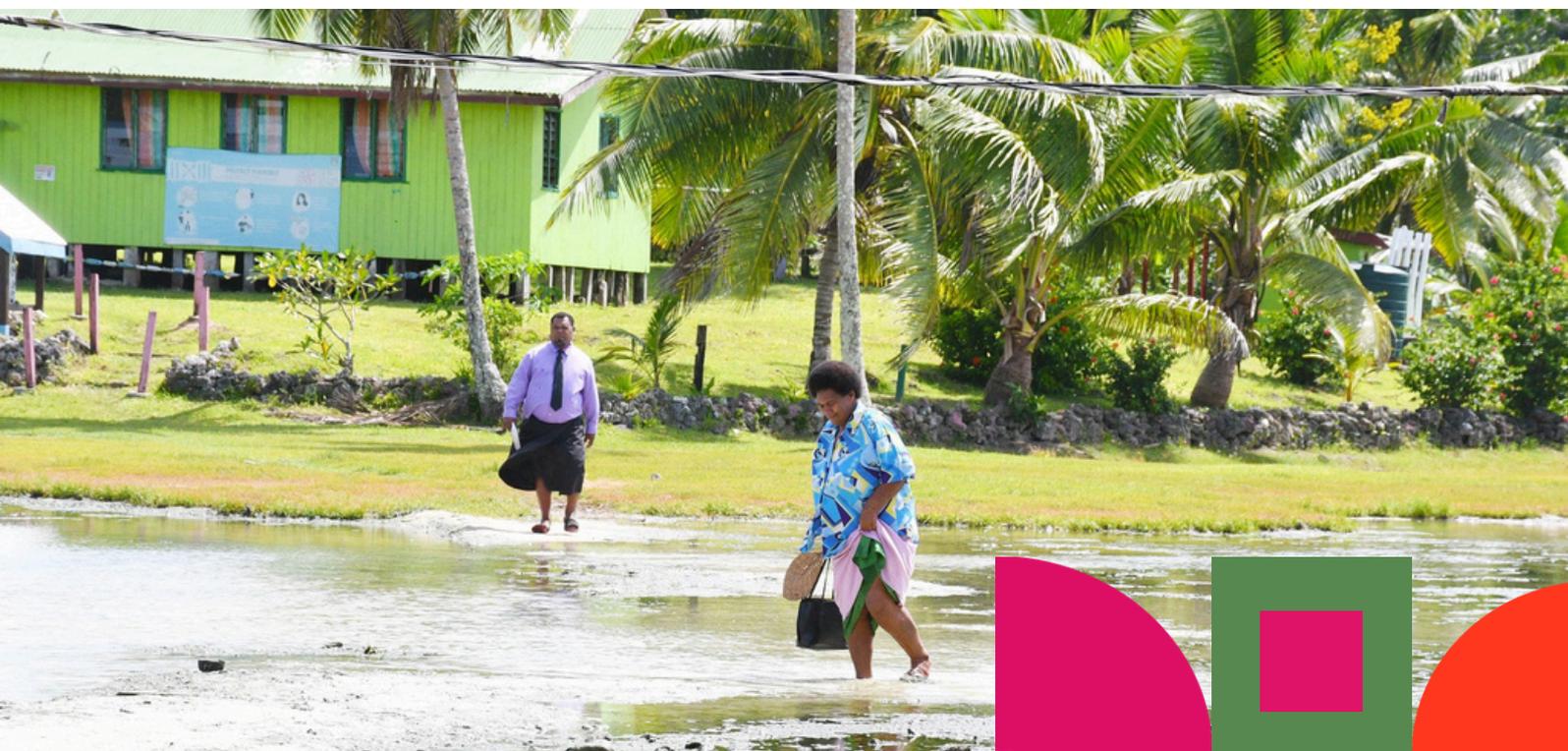
*“In Fiji, the reality of climate change is not a distant threat - it is already reshaping lives, homes, and futures”*

Paulo Baleinakorodawa, Executive Director of Transcend Oceania

### Gendered Realities of Climate Mobility

In many Fijian villages, women are responsible for food, water, and caregiving. Tasks that become far harder when gardens are flooded or homes are damaged. Men, meanwhile, face the cultural pressure to provide and lead, which can create stress, conflict, and migration dilemmas when livelihoods disappear. Youth and elders face their own vulnerabilities, often excluded from critical conversations on adaptation and relocation, as Paulo Baleinakorodawa of Transcend Oceania observes.

Nina Sikiti explains that “Fiji's patriarchal society heavily influences decision-making over relocation choices, which limits women's agency even though they disproportionately bear the roles of caregiving, food production, and





household management.” This imbalance has tangible effects. The relocation of the Tukuraki community after the landslide disaster exemplified how gender-blind planning can unintentionally deepen inequality as the open-plan housing design created new challenges for daily life and safety.

Vani Catanasiga, Executive Director Fiji Council of Social Services, expands: “there remains a gap between women’s presence and their influence. While women are increasingly included in community governance structures, traditional and cultural practices often limit their participation in formal decision-making.”

These structural barriers are compounded by a lack of information and clarity around relocation support. “This gap affects how communities mobilize, how leadership is exercised, and ultimately how people respond to relocation pressures”, Catanasiga explains.

For her, the discussion should not focus solely on women’s experiences but “on understanding relationships, responsibilities, and roles” – the social dynamics that ultimately determine how communities adapt to change.

### **Resilience and Engagement**

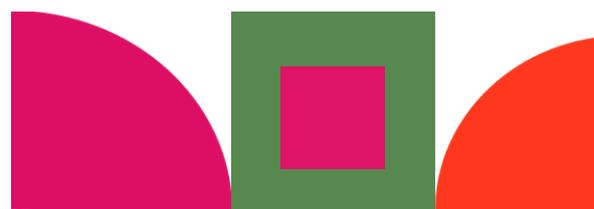
While the challenges are significant, so too are the resilience and engagement emerging across Fiji. Women are transforming community spaces into centres of adaptation,

solidarity, and leadership.

In Cogeia village, when morale dropped and relocation discussions stalled, the women’s weekly communal gatherings never stopped. “Their voices provided reason and encouragement during village meetings,” says Vani Catanasiga, Executive Director of the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS). The women later secured a Global Green Grant to launch a climate-smart agriculture project, aligning it with relocation plans to establish a nature-based waste-management system for their new site.

This example illustrates how women’s roles in food security, water collection, caregiving, and household wellbeing provide “knowledge vital for successful relocation and adaptation,” as Catanasiga highlights. Across other communities, women and youth are taking on new forms of leadership: integrating agriculture with environmental protection, advocating for rights-based relocation, and bridging traditional and modern approaches to planning. “Women play an increasingly important role in strengthening community resilience through new skills, advocacy, and innovative approaches to adaptation,” Catanasiga explains.

Paulo Baleinakorodawa of Transcend Oceania adds, “When women are included in dialogue, relocation planning becomes more holistic, addressing not only land and housing but also livelihoods, trauma, and social





Tukuraki Village officially opened on the 26th October 2017



cohesion.”

Their experiences underscore that gender is not only about identifying vulnerabilities but also about recognising the wealth of opportunities that gender-specific knowledge brings to adaptation processes.

“At Transcend Oceania, our work has focused on trauma awareness and healing, ensuring that mobility planning also addresses the invisible wounds of displacement and the potential for conflict,” Baleinakorodawa explains. “By creating safe spaces for dialogue, we have seen women step forward with confidence and men begin to share leadership in new ways.”

In Nacekoro village in Cakaudrove Province, that spirit of

shared responsibility is visible. Having gained clarity on the causes of the constant flooding in their community, the men have taken the initiative to regularly clear the nearby stream of waste carried downstream from other settlements, Catanasiga recounts.

**From Policy to Practice: Building Bridges through the GP HMCCC**

Experiences from villages like Tukuraki, Cogea, and Nacekoro show that relocation is never just about moving houses. Turning such lessons from the ground into national and regional practice lies at the heart of the Global Programme Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change (GP HMCCC II), implemented by GIZ on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation





and Development (BMZ).

The programme supports governments and communities in managing climate-related displacement and relocation by strengthening policies, capacities, and awareness. In Fiji, it helped establish one of the world's most comprehensive policy frameworks for planned relocation, a framework now embedded in law through the Climate Change Act (2021) and the Climate Relocation of Communities (CROC) Trust Fund Act (2018). Tools such as the Planned Relocation Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) were developed through extensive consultations with communities, women's groups, persons with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ networks, making Fiji's approach both inclusive and globally pioneering.

Central to this work is the recognition that human mobility is shaped by gender, culture, and social norms. The GP HMCCC integrates gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) across its training and policy support. One recent example is the Culture–Gender–Relocation Nexus study, which, as Vani Catanasiga notes, “reinforced and advanced the much-needed intentional integration of both gender and cultural perspectives into resilience initiatives, whether at the local or national level.”

Paulo Baleinakorodawa adds, “Through initiatives supported by partners like GIZ, gender checklists and participatory tools have encouraged communities to include women and youth in decision-making.”

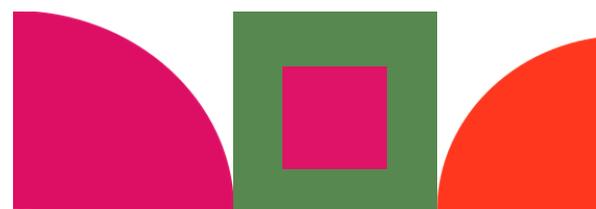
The lessons from Fiji's experience are already informing regional cooperation across the Pacific, where climate-related migration is a growing concern. By connecting communities, policymakers, and regional actors, the GP HMCCC helps ensure that relocation across the Pacific is not just a response to loss, but a step toward inclusive, just, and dignified futures.

*“We need to see mobility not just as survival, but as an opportunity to reimagine community resilience — anchored in equality, justice, and peace.”*

Paulo Baleinakorodawa, Executive Director of Transcend Oceania

### **Healing, Inclusion, and Hope: The Way Forward**

Adaptation is never purely logistical. For families who must leave ancestral land, it is an emotional journey, bound to heritage, spirituality, and belonging. Transcend Oceania works on trauma awareness and healing, ensuring that mobility planning addresses the





invisible wounds of displacement and the potential for conflict. These efforts are subtle but transformative: they redefine what resilience means in practice. It is no longer measured only by seawalls or new housing projects, but by the strength of relationships, inclusion, and dignity within communities.

There is growing recognition in Fiji that gender matters in mobility. Yet, as Vani Catanasiga points out, continued progress depends on greater accountability and the consistent application of inclusive standards. “Limited awareness and weak adherence to standards—such as free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), building codes, access to information and services, and the protection of human rights in the application of laws and policies—continue to harm communities already struggling with the impacts of climate change and natural disasters,” she explains.

Ensuring that women’s participation is not optional but integral, and that grassroots women’s groups, traditional leaders, and youth networks have the resources to shape adaptation strategies, remains a key priority for the years ahead.

As Paulo Baleinakorodawa puts it, “We need to see mobility not just as survival, but as an opportunity to reimagine community resilience — anchored in equality, justice, and peace.”

He recalls visiting the elders of Vunidogoloa, Fiji’s first community to relocate inland: “Women expressed deep anxiety about losing access to the sea, which was central not only to their food security but also to their cultural rhythm. Their voices reminded us that resilience cannot be measured by infrastructure alone, but by the preservation of dignity, identity, and connection to place.”

*Author: David Vorbau, GP HMCCC II*  
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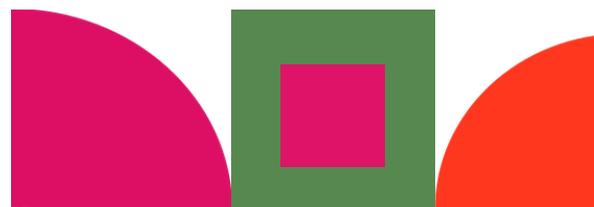
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