

Empowering women and girls in Small Island
Developing States across Asia and the Pacific

ISLAND VOICES



Empowering women and girls in Small Island
Developing States across Asia and the Pacific

ISLAND VOICES



Report produced by the UNFPA Asia-Pacific Regional Office

Overall guidance: Randima Jayasinghe

Content: Kenosha Kumaresan, Patrick Rose, Randima Jayasinghe

Design: QUO Thailand

For inquiries: asiapacific.office@unfpa.org

Published in May 2024

Cover photo: ©UNFPA

©UNFPA Asia-Pacific Regional Office 2024

Contents

Foreword	iv
Tuvalu: A world without water	1
Papua New Guinea: The threads that bind	3
Samoa: Leaving no one behind in disaster preparedness and response	4
Solomon Islands: Accessing a clinic during a climate crisis	7
Maldives: Climate advocacy for a more resilient tomorrow	8
Marshall Islands: On the frontlines of the climate crisis	11
Kiribati: Racing against the tide	13
Vanuatu: An athlete and an advocate	14
Timor-Leste: Supporting survivors of gender-based violence	17
Fiji: Ever ready to deal with humanitarian crises	18
Tonga: On-call in a crisis	21
Vanuatu: Inclusive solutions for an inclusive world	22
Papua New Guinea: The role of midwives in a climate-vulnerable world	25
Solomon Islands: Dedication to serve amidst climate disasters	26
Kiribati: Inspiring young people to take climate action	29





Foreword

Thirty years ago at the [International Conference on Population and Development \(ICPD\)](#) in Cairo, governments from around the world agreed that the sexual and reproductive rights and choices of women and girls must be at the heart of development. It is only by reaching those furthest left behind, that we can truly make this a reality.

The world has seen significant progress over the years, but this progress has not been even, leaving many people behind, women and girls especially. Small Island Developing States, commonly referred to as SIDS, are a distinct group of nations that are at risk. Their vulnerability to economic, social and environmental shocks combined with their remote geographic locations and the increasing frequency and scale of natural disasters in these locations, continue to critically hinder the progress and development of small island communities. These challenges further exacerbate the discrimination and inequalities that women and girls face, making them more vulnerable to health and safety risks.

Despite the unique and complex challenges, we must draw inspiration from the remarkable and sheer resilience of these islanders. This booklet, 'Island Voices', is a collection of stories that highlight the issues, but also the actions that women and young people are taking across SIDS in Asia and the Pacific. You will read for instance about Lily in Vanuatu who is breaking the stigma around family planning, and Senior Midwife Aiva in Papua New Guinea who is building a network of skilled birth-attendants, as well as Hamsha in the Maldives who is raising awareness on menstrual hygiene. UNFPA, together with its partners, supports Lily, Aiva, Hamsha, and more women and girls from SIDS across this diverse region to ensure their sexual and reproductive rights and choices.

At the [4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States](#) in May 2024, UNFPA will continue its work in highlighting the imperative of ensuring women and girls have access to sexual and reproductive health services, comprehensive sexuality education, and gender-based violence support services. We call on our partners to join us and amplify the need for equitable, strengthened climate governance and increased financing, inclusive of gender-responsive policies and strategies that take into account the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls, and their safety.

By empowering women and girls who are being left behind, we can and will foster more inclusive and sustainable development across SIDS, and beyond, paving the way for a future where every woman and girl can thrive with dignity and equality.



Pio Smith

Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, UNFPA

Children play on the beach in Tuvalu. The island nation faces an uncertain future due to changing weather patterns.





A world without water

◆ Tuvalu ◆

As a Small Island Developing State comprising reefs and atolls, Tuvalu has been suffering from drought in many parts of the country due to La Niña. The water shortage led the government to declare a State of Public Emergency on 8 November, 2022.

Women and girls face unique challenges maintaining their hygiene during critical water shortages and more women need protection from gender-based violence, which tends to increase during crises.

During such crises UNFPA, in coordination with local partners, distributes Dignity Kits to affected women and girls to ensure that they can manage their basic hygiene and menstrual health needs with dignity and comfort. The kits contain underwear, basic clothing, sanitary napkins, toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap and laundry powder, as well as information on the vital services that are available and how to access them.



The threads that bind

◆ Papua New Guinea ◆

Even if we are widows, or even if we come from poor families, we deserve a space in society.

“The bilum is woven by women. The fibre is twisted by women. The designs are created by women. So when you talk about bilum, it’s a woman’s thing,” says bilum weaver Florence Jaukae Kamel.

Bilums are versatile string bags put to a multitude of purposes in Papua New Guinea. They are not only used to carry goods to and from markets but also play a role in customs and ceremonies. People use them as baby carriers as well. The “bilum”, which interestingly translates to “womb” in the Tok Pisin language, are woven in different patterns, some linked to the stages of a woman’s reproductive cycle.

Explaining some of the many designs, Florence talks about a particular “skin pig” design she made which tells the story of how widows and single mothers in Papua New Guinea are only given the greasy parts of the pig to eat, symbolic of them being shunned by society. She says, “This tells my story too. This is how I am treated and this is what prompted me to create this design. Now it is more like a campaign telling the world that we cannot be treated like second class citizens. Even if we are widows, or even if we come from poor families, we deserve a space in society.”

Understanding that bilums relay important messages related to women’s health in Papua New Guinea, UNFPA uses the innovative approach of sharing the stories of bilum patterns to raise awareness among communities about women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights.



Florence’s “skin pig” bilum design symbolizes how women in Papua New Guinea are treated as second class citizens.

Leaving no one behind in disaster preparedness and response

◆ Samoa ◆

We do a lot of work with hearing impaired people in rural areas. We are trying to learn better ways to address the specific barriers they experience, and advocate for the realization of their rights.

Maselina Luta Fiso, shaped by her childhood experiences of the Samoan tsunami, now leads advocacy campaigns with the Deaf Association of Samoa to ensure that people with disabilities are disaster-ready in the face of the ongoing climate crisis.

Maselina was just a girl when a tsunami hit Samoa in 2009. With no prior information about such natural disasters or even knowing what a tsunami was, she found the evacuation with her family to be a terrifying experience. She now works to ensure early warning systems reach people with all types of disabilities, so that those most at risk will be better prepared as the climate crisis intensifies in Samoa.

Today Maselina leads advocacy campaigns with the Deaf Association of Samoa, engaging the Ministry of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Samoa Meteorological Services and the National Disaster Management Office to ensure that the special needs of persons who are hearing impaired are prioritized in disaster preparedness and response.

Maselina says, “We do a lot of work with hearing impaired people in rural areas. We are trying to learn better ways to address the specific barriers they experience, and advocate at the community and national level for the realization of their rights as guided by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.”





Accessing a clinic during a climate crisis

◆ Solomon Islands ◆

Climate change has severely affected the country, making access to a clinic a challenge.

“Climate change is definitely affecting women of the Solomon Islands trying to seek help,” says Dr. Leeanne Panisi, the Solomon Islands’ first and only female obstetrician.

Dr. Leeanne leads the work on emergency births and is determined to reduce maternal mortality in her country. “Climate change definitely has affected health services in the Solomon Islands, not just for women, but overall,” says Dr. Leeanne. “Solomon Islands is geographically challenged with islands stretching as far as Vanuatu in the east and bordering with Papua New Guinea in the west.”

“Evacuating cases from these remote islands to Honiara (the capital and largest city) is a major challenge. When there is bad weather and there’s a woman that needs to be referred, we can’t transport her until the weather gets better.”

She goes on to say, “Getting women to go from their village to health centres is a challenge. Where I am from, on the western coast of Guadalcanal, they used to have roads. Now there are no longer roads; it’s covered by rocks. The sea has damaged the road and people have to cross the hill to get to the other side.”

“Now imagine having a pregnant mother who needs to get to the nearest clinic. Climate change has severely affected the country, making access to a clinic a challenge. The rising sea impacts the houses of families and children and it impacts people in terms of earning enough money to pay for transport from their village to the health centre. Climate change is definitely affecting women of the Solomon Islands trying to seek medical help.”

Climate advocacy for a more resilient tomorrow

◆ Maldives ◆

As a woman living in a country facing an existential climate crisis, Hamsha has been exploring solutions to reduce waste and is determined that this work make a difference in her nation.

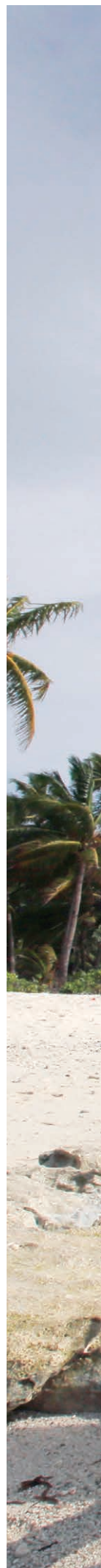
An architect by profession, Hamsha Hussain is passionate about proper disposal of waste in her island nation and is exploring new solutions to reduce waste while helping women and girls find sustainable solutions for their menstrual hygiene and health needs.



Hamsha is a climate advocate and co-founder of Zero Waste Maldives, a non-government organization promoting a “Zero Waste Low Impact Lifestyle in the Maldives.” Her vision is the proper disposal of waste through education and awareness, and through the provision of alternatives as well as “waste to wealth” programmes.

As a woman living in a country facing an existential climate crisis, Hamsha has been exploring solutions to reduce waste and is determined that this work will make a difference. She partnered with UNFPA to work on a pilot project that links waste reduction and climate action to menstrual health – the ‘Cupvert Project’. This project has given her a platform to raise awareness on these issues and introduce sustainable solutions to meet the needs of women and girls.

Hamsha is an inspiration to many young women and girls. Her work has greatly contributed towards breaking stigmas and creating a safe space for conversations around menstrual hygiene and sexual and reproductive health, especially amongst young people and those living in marginalized communities, including persons with disabilities.





Joanne is a single mother looking after her son in a makeshift house outside of Majuro, in the Marshall Islands.





On the frontlines of the climate crisis

◆ Marshall Islands ◆

As a Small Island Developing State, the Republic of the Marshall Islands is highly exposed to hurricanes, cyclones and other extreme weather events, which are becoming all the more frequent and intense due to the impacts of climate change which are causing significant loss and damage to the nation, its people, and the planet as a whole.

As sea levels continue to rise and temperatures soar, threatening the marine ecosystems and livelihoods of communities, UNFPA continues to support the government of the Marshall Islands in ensuring that the sexual and reproductive health and rights of Marshallese women, adolescents and youth are upheld amidst these climate crises.





Racing against the tide

◆ Kiribati ◆

Kiribati has some of the highest levels of maternal mortality in the region. In 2020, over 70 women died giving birth.

Frantelle, 24, gently taps her 7-month baby bump as she waits in line for a scan. “I don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl. I haven’t gone to the hospital yet,” she says, “but this is my fourth pregnancy. I should be fine.”

Kiribati, a Small Island Developing State with just over 100,000 people scattered across 32 atolls in the Pacific Ocean, has some of the highest levels of maternal mortality in the region. In 2020, over 70 women died giving birth due to lack of access to quality maternal health care. UNFPA is on the ground in Kiribati working with authorities and community based organizations to improve women and girls access to healthcare.

Born and raised in Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati, Frantelle plans to grow old in her hometown which may cease to exist in the near future, given the rising sea levels.

“Climate change is making our country disappear. But what can we do, except strive to live our best life every day,” she says. “Maybe my children will move somewhere else; but, that’s for them to decide, and that’s why I need to keep working and complete my studies so that they can have a better future.”

An athlete and an advocate

◆ Vanuatu ◆

Family planning is central to gender equality and women's empowerment, and is a key factor in reducing poverty.

Lily lawantak, 34, is an outspoken advocate for family planning in a community where the subject is often perceived as taboo. Growing up on Tanna Island, Vanuatu, Lilly, a runner, became a professional athlete in a culture where women's careers are rarely prioritized, compared to those of their male counterparts.

Lily considers herself lucky to have a partner like Kasi. "He is my ally" she says. Kasi has always been supportive of Lily's decision to access sexual and reproductive health information and services as she wishes, and the couple engage in such important conversations about their choices as a family. "I am so blessed to have a male champion of women's sexual and reproductive health like Kasi as my partner," Lily said.

Family planning entails providing information, education, services and methods that allow individuals to choose and decide whether and when to have children — it is central to gender equality and women's empowerment, and is a key factor in reducing poverty. Family planning methods such as contraceptives prevent unintended pregnancies and lower the incidence of death and disability related to complications of pregnancy and childbirth.

However, myths and misconceptions around family planning prevent many people in Vanuatu from using contraceptives.

For Lily, having access to quality sexual and reproductive health information and services helped her to decide the size of her family. It helped Lily and Kasi to provide a better quality of life for the children they do have, while avoiding potential health complications. Such benefits should be available to families across all Small Island Developing States.









Supporting survivors of gender-based violence

◆ Timor-Leste ◆

For pregnant women, domestic violence is a risk for themselves and their baby. But many women don't want to report it because they are dependent on their husband.

Dulce dos Santos is a midwife in one of Timor-Leste's largest coastal towns who receives many pregnant women who have suffered abuse by their partners – often brought in by the police.

Dulce had dreamed of becoming a midwife since she was at school. Having achieved this ambition she is proud of the critical role that health workers like her play in helping treat survivors of gender-based violence and sharing information about the services available to them.

“For pregnant women, domestic violence is a risk for themselves and their baby. But many women don't want to report it because they are dependent on their husband. Some women are scared. My responsibility as a health provider is to help women find their way. I do not solve their problems but I inform and refer them to all available services, such as legal counseling, health care and psychosocial support.”

In this Small Island Developing State, 34 per cent of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15–49 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the past 12 months. The role of Dulce and many other health care providers is vital and lifesaving.

Ever ready to deal with humanitarian crises

◆ Fiji ◆

UNFPA's humanitarian response is to move quickly to protect the health and protection needs of communities in crisis.

Retired Fijian midwife Litia Naralulu has helped hundreds of affected women and girls recover through multiple climate disasters, including Cyclone Pam in 2015. She now advocates to strengthen the provision of life-saving sexual and reproductive health services in the Pacific.

Litia knows that when emergencies strike, women and girls are most at-risk. Pregnancy-related deaths and unintended pregnancies increase as essential sexual and reproductive health services are disrupted by natural and man-made disasters.

Emergencies can also increase the risk of multiple forms of gender-based violence. UNFPA's humanitarian response prioritizes the health and protection needs of communities in crisis. This includes maintaining a roster of retired midwives who can be quickly mobilized across the Pacific to reinforce the health workforce and supply vital sexual and reproductive health services during emergencies.

Litia was one of the midwives deployed by UNFPA in 2015 when Cyclone Pam hit the island nation of Vanuatu. She recalls, "When we got there it was chaotic. The nurses and other health care workers had been working non-stop at the hospital. They hadn't gone to their homes or seen their families in weeks. So we stepped in and relieved them for a few weeks so they could go and be with their families and most importantly, get some rest. We covered the labour wards and the postnatal ward, attending to the pregnant women, new mothers and babies."

Small Island Developing States like Fiji and Vanuatu are extremely vulnerable to climate disasters like cyclones and floods. This is why having committed midwives like Litia is critical. Not only can they provide life-saving services to women and girls during humanitarian crises, but they can also be mentors and role models by passing on their experience and techniques to younger health care workers.





On-call in a crisis

◆ Tonga ◆

There was a serious lack of water for women to provide for the rest of the family. It didn't feel like they were accessing proper hygiene when undergoing menstruation.

Dr. Patrick Penitai was the only doctor on call in 2022 when the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai volcano erupted, causing tsunamis which badly impacted Tonga and other islands. It showed him first-hand how natural disasters can have dire consequences for the health of women and girls.

When the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai volcano erupted in January 2022, the resulting tsunami destroyed much of the basic infrastructure on many low-lying islands and atolls in Tonga and further afield. At the time, Dr. Penitai was the only doctor on the island of Siesia-Nukunukumotu, one of the places most badly impacted by the disaster. The experience allowed him to see how such disasters negatively impact the lives of all islanders, especially women and girls.

"There was a serious lack of water for women to provide for the rest of the family," he recalls. "With women's menstrual health issues, it didn't feel like they were accessing proper hygiene when undergoing menstruation."

Dr. Penitai is now the Chief Medical Officer for 'Eua, Ministry of Health, and he was on-call to support the Women and Girl Friendly Space teams that hosted sessions for women and girls to talk about their post-tsunami challenges.

Dr. Penitai continues to work with UNFPA to ensure that Dignity Kits and Menstrual Hygiene Management Kits are pre-positioned and ready to be distributed to help adolescent girls manage their menstruation.

Inclusive solutions for an inclusive world

◆ Vanuatu ◆

Persons with disabilities must be consulted when preparing disaster preparedness plans.

Nelly Caleb was a child when she lost sight in her left eye. The experiences she has had since have led to her becoming the National Coordinator of the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association and she helps people with disabilities be ready for climate disasters on small islands.

Nelly recalls, “I was 10 years old when I lost my eyesight in my left eye and my life has changed significantly since then. It prompted me to be outspoken and become an advocate for disability inclusion across all sectors. In doing so, I faced a lot of resistance. I was even sacked from my job for attending a training programme overseas. But I kept going and now I have been serving as the National Coordinator for the past 15 years.”

Small Island Developing States like Vanuatu face enormous challenges due to climate vulnerabilities. Nelly recalls the 2020 Tropical Cyclone Harold, a Category 5 cyclone which caused serious havoc and damage to communities across the islands.

“In times like this, the emergency preparedness and responses are not geared towards accommodating persons with disabilities. For example, in Vanuatu the government set up early warning sirens, but for those who are hearing impaired, how will they know if the siren is on?” says Nelly.

“In 2008 I remember there was a mass evacuation and I saw persons with disabilities evacuated in a separate area without their caregivers – completely vulnerable. This is why persons with disabilities must be consulted when developing disaster preparedness plans.”





Birthing unit



The role of midwives in a climate-vulnerable world

◆ Papua New Guinea ◆

Living in a Small Island Developing State, the women and girls of Papua New Guinea face increasing climate-induced vulnerabilities. In the face of these unique challenges, the role of midwives cannot be overstated.

Inspired by the work of her grandfather, a post orderly, Sister Aiva Pikuri trained to become a midwife and is now a Senior Midwife and Labour Ward Sister-in-Charge teaching other women and health workers about sexual and reproductive health and midwifery.

Sister Aiva works at the Provincial Hospital in Goroka, in the Eastern Highlands Province, and has 20 years of experience working in midwifery. She now helps to train others in emergency obstetric and newborn care, and has helped develop a community health workers programme.

Her passion for public health started when she was young. Her grandfather was a post orderly who travelled to remote health outposts across the country.

“When I went to visit him I could see the struggles that women were facing,” Aiva recalls.

This inspired her to go into nursing. But then a tragedy struck her family. “I lost my aunt to a postpartum hemorrhage. This was a second baby and she died because there was no skilled birth attendant to attend to her.” This motivated her to become a midwife. Twenty years later, Aiva is a hugely committed and experienced midwife and educator and is helping to build a network of skilled birth-attendants in Papua New Guinea. She feels that this role is more important than ever.

Living in a Small Island Developing State, the women and girls of Papua New Guinea face increasing climate-induced vulnerabilities and in the face of these unique challenges, the role of midwives like Sister Aiva cannot be overstated.

Dedication to serve amidst climate disasters

◆ Solomon Islands ◆

I love the first embrace when the baby is just born. The baby's first breath is so special.

Bethlyn Warereau's career as a midwife was just starting when the Solomon Island's Mataniko River burst its banks in 2014. The disaster had a huge impact on women's and girls' health and showed her that midwives need more training in emergency care as natural disasters increase in number.

Bethlyn works as a midwife with the Solomon Islands Government and retains her passion for the job. "I love the first embrace when the baby is just born. The first moment of life, coming into the world is very important. Sometimes something can go wrong, the baby can die. So the baby's first breath is so special."

When the Mataniko River flooded, dozens of people were killed and nearly 10,000 people were displaced. Bethlyn visited camps and shelters to determine how she could help the women and girls affected. She organized women's circles to help them talk about their menstrual hygiene needs and health issues. Now Bethlyn's work with the Ministry of Health helps ensure that midwives are trained in emergency care as climate disasters increase in number and intensity.

The Solomon Islands face frequent climate change related issues including flooding, especially in the eastern regions. As a Small Island Developing State, the geographic terrain is widespread, meaning the nearest health facility might be too far to access in emergencies.

"Mothers often give birth at home due to transportation issues, it is a major challenge. Getting there is also not easy, resulting in complications along the way so mothers give birth at home. This means there is no skilled birth attendant with them at the time," says Bethlyn.

She goes on to say, "We have cyclones happening more often now. This is why we need to have a pool of health personnel like midwives, doctors, nurses trained specifically in maternal health during crisis and such emergencies. These teams should be ready to be immediately deployed to these disaster areas."





Inspiring young people to take climate action

◆ Kiribati ◆

It's so important that every young person, especially women and girls, know that living with no violence is their basic human right.

As President of the National Youth Centre and the Tungaru Youth Action Club, Baniti Semilota, a 23-year-old from Kiribati, stands at the forefront of youth leadership in the island nation, advocating for climate action and gender equality while working to create impactful change within her community.

Baniti's activism journey began when she won the title of Miss Kiribati in 2020. Using this platform, she engaged in community service and used her public engagements to raise awareness of gender-based violence. Understanding the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues, she became an advocate for climate action as well.

In 2022, Baniti launched the Tungaru Action Club, focusing on empowering young people with knowledge about climate change as well as teaching life skills. She was invited as the only youth delegate from Kiribati to represent young people at COP27. But Baniti felt, "One voice alone was not enough" and she knew that she needed to make a much bigger impact if young people were to be heard. After Baniti successfully argued for a greater youth representation, Kiribati sent its first-ever six-member youth delegation to COP28 in 2023.

Given the vulnerabilities of Kiribati as a Small Island Developing State, Baniti's activism extends beyond conferences; she organizes coastal clean-ups and mangrove planting, while engaging with youth leaders in remote islands. With a background in law, she stresses the importance of knowing one's rights, especially for women and girls facing abuse. "I only learned my rights when I joined law school. It's so important that every young person, especially women and girls, know that living with no violence is their basic human right."

Baniti aspires to use her unwavering determination to influence national policies, ensuring that the rights of women and young people are upheld across Kiribati.





United Nations Population Fund

Asia-Pacific Regional Office, Rajdamnern Nok Avenue, Bangkok 10200 Thailand

asiapacific.unfpa.org