



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

## Pacific Climate Mobility

*Woven ta'ovala, made with string in the absence of pandanus leaves. 'Atataa Si'i, Tonga, 2023.*

### **(Im)movable Women**

**Climate Change Mobility Research  
Tonga and Samoa**

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## OVERVIEW AND NOTE ON SCOPE

This product fits into a broader research effort on the future of climate change mobility in the Pacific, enabled by New Zealand's climate finance through the International Development Cooperation (IDC) Programme. This report is the product of dedicated engagements with women in Tonga and Samoa throughout 2023 and early 2024. Insights were garnered from women's workshops held in Tonga (Kolomotu'a, Tongatapu – a low-lying district in urban Tongatapu, exposed to pluvial flooding and some issues with soil salination) and Samoa (Lalomanu, Upolu – a village that relocated inland and upland following the 2009 tsunami). Insights were supplemented with one-on-one and group talanoa with women in different leadership roles in government (Ministry for Women, Community and Social Development, Disaster Management Office, Samoa and the Ministry for Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Tonga), Academia (National University of Samoa), Church (multiple), business and community.

In total, approximately 60 women were engaged specifically with questions around women's changing roles in Tongan/Samoan society, differentiated impacts, fears and hopes regarding future climate/environmental mobility. Many more women were engaged in this project more broadly though this particular report is centred on the findings from targeted efforts.

This research product hopes to shed some light on the differentiated role/s of women in Tonga and Samoa and how roles are changing, the roles women play in major family or community decision making (e.g., on mobility), how women are uniquely or particularly impacted by mobility and how some women are thinking about or approaching future scenarios regarding possible climate mobility.

This product also seeks to highlight some examples of leadership women have and are taking in the context of mobility and environmental disasters in Tonga and Samoa.

The research team wishes to emphasise that this product cannot hope to do justice to all the roles women have and do play in Tongan and Samoan society, nor can it hope to be exhaustive in sharing the efforts, hopes, fears of all women as they relate to historic or future (climate) mobility. This is an entry piece of work and there is much more to be explored, see next steps for some notes on this.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the participants and authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

## SUMMARY OF INSIGHTS

Women 'traditionally', and for the most part continue to play the critical role of social connectors in Tongan and Samoan societies – within and between families. One described women's role as the 'glue'. The importance of this role – being well-networked, socially-minded and highly socially conscious – is highlighted in the fact that Tongan and Samoan societies are so heavily grounded in social context.

There was also great alignment in Tonga and Samoa that women are the wealth makers, the wealth keepers and (knowledge) wealth transmitters. This wealth is created and held in part through koloa/siapo (ngatu, woven mats etc.). Wealth was also described in the stories that women held and shared, including critical genealogical or whakapapa knowledge which affords/ed them unique social power and insights.

There was consensus in both Tonga and Samoa that women have taken on increasing responsibilities in the family and in the community, in no minor part because of the participation rates of males in Tonga/Samoa in overseas mobility. This has established a new baseline for women's roles, adding to their existing responsibilities more manual, technical and outside work that would have been more the domain of men. They are having to juggle these new demands with oftentimes sole caring duties for the family in the absence of husbands, fathers and brothers. Women in Tonga at least are increasing their share of formal employment and many report taking on new community leadership roles, for example, a women's led disaster preparation group in Kolomotu'a, Tonga. In Samoa women spoke on their roles in

disaster response and recovery in areas persistently struck by floods.

Women face a number of barriers to mobility, including barriers that closely link to the social roles that they play. In Tonga in particular, women expressed great anxiety at the prospect of mobility owing to risks to their pride, and the vulnerability of their social status should they relocate and have to start again in terms of establishing themselves in a new village setting. Tongan women in particular as well were concerned that moving would be impractical with the amount of koloa they have and worried about their ability to fulfil their role (e.g., providing the right koloa for family occasions) should they have to leave their koloa behind. Finally, a few women in Tonga emphasised their land insecurity and lack of relative options for alternate housing should they have to leave their current home. In Samoa, many women spoke on the mental barriers that would need to be overcome by women in order to begin necessary planning for possible mobility futures. Others in Samoa emphasised that many simply would not be able to afford to relocate/mobilise and start again.

Regarding decision making on matters such as mobility, women in a workshop held in Samoa were very much aligned in their roles – advising the Matai and elders on the options, ensuring that decisions are fair for all, supporting the decision once made, and preparing the family. Other women in Samoa felt that women are highly influential in village level decisions, giving examples of women changing the decisions of (male) Matai if they did not agree with it. In Tonga, women were often believed to be the critical decision influencers or decision-makers though the males may at times be the 'mouthpiece' for the decision. One woman shared that if a male is unmarried, he would get direction on a major family decision from his sisters or mother instead.

Key impacts of environmental mobility on women in Tonga included not being able to fulfil their role of providing family with suitable koloa for funerals or weddings etc. following the loss of koloa in disaster. This affected many women who reported impacts on their sense of self-worth. In Samoa and Tonga, the predominant concern however was the impact on income continuity, mainly driven by severed access to pandanus plants for weaving. One woman in the relocated village of 'Atataa Si'i, Tonga took an innovative approach to this issue by weaving instead with string, and in no longer being able to sell her craft at a local market, was selling instead to overseas diaspora via a social media platform. In Samoa, over a decade after relocation of a village inland and upland, concerns around changes in income was also linked to greater levels of reported domestic violence in the home.

Overall, women engaged in this research demonstrated a highly pragmatic view of future mobility, often being the ones encouraging their partners and families to look towards the future. Women suggested that it would be critical to start preparing the minds of women in Tonga and Samoa for future climate mobility scenarios given their influential roles in families and increasing leadership in their broader communities.

## WOMEN AND THEIR ROLES

*“Women are the makers of traditional wealth... and the stories that link everything... it’s linked to their self-worth, their mental health... that’s what they are here for.” Samoa*

*“There are less men around now to do the work... more and more women are taking on outside work – they are working on ships, in the plantation, doing electricity line work... and this is added on top of their usual responsibilities.” Tonga*

*“No one is supporting our women...” Samoa*

### THE SOCIAL WEAVERS, THE GLUE

In attempts to define the ‘traditional’ roles of women in Tonga, the overwhelming consensus was that women are the social weavers, the ‘glue’ for the family, and the keepers of critical genealogical knowledge that affords a great deal of power. Some reflected on older Tongan society (one to two generations ago) and shared how the mothers in the family decided how food would be shared within the family, initiated the sharing of food with neighbours and others of status in the broader community and were deeply ‘tapped in’ to the social fabric of the community – effectively nurturing, building and protecting the family’s critical social capital. Men were described as the ones with technical skills and knowledge (e.g., food planting regimes) and prior to indoor kitchens, were the ones typically responsible for firewood collection, food preparation/cooking and clean up for the family.

In women’s workshops in Samoa, women spoke on the importance of maintaining gender norms within the village, including for women and mothers as the ones who look after the family. One woman described this as ‘our best role’. Others referenced a similar sentiment of women as the keepers of critical traditional knowledge, saying that it is an important role of women to demonstrate and share the values of fa’a Samoa. This was described however as means to an end – the sharing and practice of fa’a Samoa secured harmony in the aiga and surrounding village.

### THE WEALTH-MAKERS AND WEALTH-KEEPERS

In talanoa with both Tongans and Samoans, there was great alignment that one of the central roles of women in Tongan/Samoan society is as the traditional wealth-makers. Wealth was and is created by women through the skilful production of ngatu/siapo, woven mats (usually using pandanus leaf) and other crafted treasure (koloa). Some described women as the koloa themselves – embodying knowledge, skill and wisdom. ‘Ilo (Tongan)/ilola (Samoan) can be knowing or knowledge and can also describe seeing<sup>1</sup>. Poto on the other hand is a wise person or application of ‘ilo/’ilola in ways that are beneficial to one’s family and society. Realising an advanced stage of poto brings respect and an esteemed social position in both Tongan and Samoan societies. It is on women to observe from those with greater knowledge and experience, and pass on this knowledge to others, including the younger generation through demonstration and practice. One woman community leader in Samoa asserted “to pass on knowledge is to practice it”.

Women typically create these works through village women’s committees, with an agreed number of outputs expected annually. Their work is often presented and celebrated at events during or at the end of the year. Many are given away to estate holders, Matai, Churches as a sign of respect (to God, ancestors etc.) and contributes to the maintenance of va lelei (good relationships). Others may be sold to generate income for the family.

Beyond the creation of these pieces, or koloa, there is a central role for women (i.e., there is typically an expectation of women) to provide the appropriate pieces for large or important social events – like a funeral, wedding, or baptism. One senior woman within the village of Kolomotu’a Tonga shared how if there is a death in New Zealand, people will travel to Tonga to collect the appropriate koloa for that occasion. Women will often travel to accompany the koloa from Tonga.

Many women spoke about their koloa fondly and protectively – how they could not imagine parting with their koloa – how these items have been with them ‘since day one’, with many being passed down through multiple generations of mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers.

1. Thaman, K. H. (1988). *Ako and faiaiko: Educational concepts, cultural values and teachers’ role perception in Tonga*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji.

## SHIFTING GROUND

In talanoa and in dedicated workshops with women in Tonga and Samoa, many referred to a shifting social context for women. These shifts were attributed to western influences (starting with things like moving cooking activities from outside, where it was 'men's work', to inside where women had more of a role), and Christian influences on gender and gender roles. More recently, women and men spoke on the impacts of years of overseas seasonal work taking men, and increasingly women, away from their families and villages for months at a time.

In Samoa, a female pastor spoke about men/husbands/fathers travelling overseas for work and not returning, leaving women to raise children alone, often with full financial dependence on their in-laws. A senior government leader voiced frustration at the unacknowledged impacts of seasonal work and mobility on women in Samoa and shared some tragic stories of a few of these women taking their own lives as a result. Another senior leader in the Disaster Management Office in Samoa reported her frustration at losing staff members – employed policy officers – to seasonal work programs in New Zealand and Australia.

In Tonga, many shared the belief that 'there are no men to do the work' and women have stepped in to fill the gap, with women now undertaking 'outside work' such as electrical line work or working on sea ships – a new development for Tonga. Data from the Tonga Statistics Department shows that women have increased their share of employment in Tonga. Further, others reported women taking on more work in the plantations, including leading community efforts to teach others agricultural skills. One senior government leader in Tonga shared that the top root crop exporter is a woman.

In the future scenarios workshop held in Tonga in July 2023, one woman shared a creative piece of writing describing a night during a major tropical cyclone. This scene described a number of women-led households, absent of men, coming together in the disaster. In this creative piece the woman described herself and her mother ultimately relocating overseas to be reunited with their father/husband. The embedded nature of absent/overseas males in the psyche of some women in Tonga struck the researchers as particularly insightful.

This perception of 'missing men' is also validated somewhat by data – including the gender imbalance now in the population, and the ever-increasing proportion of households in Tonga that are 'women-led households.'





## THE DECISION-MOVERS

*“Very few decisions get made without women’s approval – if the women don’t like a decision made in the Council, they will tell the men to change it.” Samoa*

*“Men think of the first step, women think of the next step, and the next step, and the next step after that.” Tonga*

*“It is the woman or the wife/mother’s role to advise on the benefits of different options, to consider if a decision is fair on everyone, and to support the decision when it is made.” Samoa*

*“It’s the woman who ultimately says if it is time to run.” Tonga*

During workshops and in one-on-one talanoa, women were asked about their roles in decision-making, particularly for major family or aiga decisions such as relocating the family.

At face value, women in Samoa were highly aligned on their relative roles in an important aiga decision (based on a scenario of deciding whether the family or village should relocate). They described their role as advisors – sharing the benefits and drawbacks of each option with Matai and aiga elders, openly discussing all aspects of the decision, raising concerns around the fairness of different options, considering the impacts on different members of the family, supporting the decision once made, and preparing the family (for the agreed action).

In further talanoa, including one-on-one with women in Samoa and Tonga, a more nuanced picture was painted of women and decision-making. While it was noted that important decision making is often balanced between e.g., the husband and wife, and though the man (husband, Matai or other) may even have the ‘final say’ as the head of the family, several women also revealed the subtleties of women’s influence on family or village level decision making. Women and their women’s committees in Samoa are responsible for much of the activities and development seen in the villages. A female academic in Samoa described the subtle but impactful influence of women and women’s committees in many villages, sharing her perspective that women have changed decisions made by (male) Matai if they do not agree with them.

In a women’s workshop in Tonga, women described how they are the ones who think ‘of everything and everyone’, to ‘slow down the thinking’ and think multiple steps along from a decision. This is captured by the term ‘fakakaukau’<sup>1</sup>– the Tongan word for thinking (and considering everyone/everything). One woman shared that it is often the women in a sudden event who makes the call on action (“it’s the woman who says whether to run!”). Another woman shared her perspective “the man is like the empty box, and the woman puts the thinking in the box!”

Others in Tonga, including men engaged in talanoa, were aligned on the power and influence of women on family decisions. The women were reported to be the ones making the decision for the family, though the husband or father can at times be the ‘mouthpiece’ for that decision. In Tonga, if a man is unmarried, it would be common for the man’s sister or mother to hold the role of the direction giver or decision-maker/influencer.

1. Vaiioleti, T. M. (2011). *Talanoa, manulua and founa ako: Frameworks for using enduring Tongan educational ideas for education in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Waikato).

## WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND DISASTER

In Tonga, women described increasing leadership roles not just at the household level, but community or village level as well. One woman shared how she chairs an all-woman disaster preparedness committee in the district of Kolomotu'a. This group runs activities like disaster drills for the community and organises, lobbies local government for funding and keeps emergency food kits at a local church hall. It is unique for a group like this to be led by women, though those in the workshop described further aspirations to grow more all-women 'troops' centred around district resilience and improvement.

One woman from the relocated island of 'Atataa, now living in the village of 'Atataa Si'i, shared how during the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai eruption she carried her elderly mother then her elderly uncle up a hill to escape the tsunami. Her daughter attempted to carry a physically disabled man up a hill as well though they were both swept away in the process.<sup>1</sup> During the same eruption, other women from Tongatapu shared how they played lead roles in the coordination and evacuation of family, including the confirmation of each family member's whereabouts and decision-making on actions taken.

In Samoa, an academic leader shared how women are responsible for most, if not all, of the village level activities, including development and beautification efforts around the village. They are often leading the clean-up efforts following disaster events as well. A woman in the village of Lelata – an area often impacted by damaging floods – shared how women continue to take on more and more of the burden of village disaster preparation, as well as response and recovery. She shared how she and other women are often left to coordinate evacuations during flooding as the men are typically out on formal (employed) roles. She reported that in Lelata, they are also the ones left with the hard work of clean up. She lamented the lack of acknowledgement of these critical roles that women are playing in disaster, and the lack of support.

In terms of innovation leadership, one woman now living in 'Atataa Si'i shared how she (and others) no longer have access to pandanus plants to weave so she adapted her approach to use string instead. She displayed several ta'ovala sets she had woven with red and white string and shared how she also adapted, with the help of her daughter, the way that she now sells her crafts – promoting and selling her work to Tongan diaspora overseas. She believed that she is now making more income selling her work this way than prior to the eruption and relocation from 'Atataa. This same woman was noted to be making pots for pot plants out of old fabric soaked in cement that she was drying over old tyres on her small house plot of land.

## MOBILITY DECISION FACTORS FOR WOMEN

*"I will be vulnerable... my pride will be at risk... I have my seat in church. If I go to a new church, they might make me sit outside on the veranda." Kolomotu'a, Tonga*

*"Women worry about acceptance. Will they know me... will I be accepted there?" Kolomotu'a, Tonga*

*"These [koloa] I've had since day one. It would be so hard to leave those things behind..." Kolomotu'a, Tonga*

*"When a disaster happens, what are we going to do? Go cut down some coconut trees [somewhere else] and start again? No. So we stay." Kolomotu'a, Tonga*

*"I think about me, now, at 70 – how will I start from scratch?" Upolu, Samoa*

Women's influence and leadership at household, community and church levels in Tonga and Samoa makes it even more

1. Both survived, with the daughter managing to swim to safety with a significant injury to her leg. The man was found in Tongatapu having drifted there over the course of a day or so.

critical that their reservations, concerns, perspectives and real barriers to mobility are better understood.

In Tonga, in the context of future mobility, most women shared variations of a similar anxiety – a fear of social vulnerability on mobility. The centrality of this concern makes great sense when grounded in the context of women in Tonga being hyper-connected into societal structures and being responsible for the growth and maintenance of social capital for the family.

One woman talked about how many Tongan women carry a lot of pride and that the protection of that pride (or avoiding risks to their pride) can be centred in decision making, including regarding mobility. Women spoke about their concerns about risks to their social status if they were to move – that all they have worked towards (in e.g., their family, background, status within their own village) will be disregarded or generally unknown to others in a new setting. This anxiety seemed higher in discussions around internal mobility, possibly believing that their social vulnerability will not be as high in a different (overseas) context.

Other women in Tonga spoke about their pride as it relates to their home village. In Kolomotu'a – an old area in Tongatapu – women shared how people hold great pride in being from Kolomotu'a ("we've been here since 'Aho'aitu 1"). This pride has said to underpin decisions to remain on the land, even following flooding and storm-related disasters with one woman putting it simply "[in Kolomotu'a] we don't move here". One woman described 'swimming in the lounge' during one tropical storm in the 1980's and still there being no discussion about moving. They also shared that the fact they have a tax allotment of plantation land means they have an alternative place to live should disaster impacts come too frequently to allow for timely rebuilds. This same woman shared her view that the alternative to rebuilding – clearing new land and setting up a new home elsewhere (i.e., not on their existing tax allotment) – is just not practical.

Other women in Kolomotu'a shared that despite having their home increasingly (and persistently) flooded by pluvial flooding, she has no desire to leave and simply hopes for some support to access a few tonnes of solid rock to sufficiently raise her house.

One woman in Tongatapu shared her concern about being unable to fulfil her role as a woman for the family if she had to move without some or all her koloa, saying "if we have to move suddenly, what if [a funeral or big social occasion] happens straight away – we will be worried about how we get those things – they'll all be back at home."

Another woman, living in Tongatapu but not based in Kolomotu'a, offered an alternate view of her hesitations. She shared that while common, not all women in Tonga are as concerned about koloa, have a large collection or are expected to provide these things for family occasions, saying 'it's different for everyone'. For her, she shared her mind 'is not bogged down by these material things' and that she depends on God to open doors'. Her anxieties around possible future mobility however was centred on land. She described how women have limited land holding rights in Tonga but how she, as a never-married woman, has an enduring right to live and remain at the family home "the heir cannot eject me." She shared how her limited housing options makes future mobility a daunting thought, saying that she cannot see where she would or could move and that she would find it very psychologically hard. Despite this, she shared that if she were to be allocated land that was hers, with little concern for where it was in Tonga, as long as it was hers, she said she would move there and would 'feel at home' as she would have a sense of security

"I would feel fine if the government gave me land, I wouldn't miss much. Though here I can walk anywhere, I might just need a car." She also shared how her cousin in New Zealand often encourages her to go live there with them but that she pushes back saying that Tonga is where she wants to be "I wake up in the morning and do this and that."

Another common factor influencing mobility decision making for woman (though not limited to women), was a strong sense of obligation to remain to care for parents and/or siblings. In Samoa, one family shared how a sister of theirs remained in Savai'i as their mother did not want to leave their homeland, despite the challenges and risks of frequent environmental disasters. Their mother has since passed, was buried in the homeland in Savai'i and the sister now does not want to leave the land where their mother's body rests. Other examples of this powerful sense of obligation was also reported Tonga, with a woman in Patangata Tonga sharing that while she recognises the risks and impacts of climate change on their home there, she has no plans to move - as the eldest daughter as she feels she needs to care for her parents, and for her younger unmarried siblings. In talanoa with a woman in Ha'apai, Tonga, she got quite tearful discussing her plans to leave Ha'apai for Tongatapu and eventually onto New Zealand, saying that she feels guilty for

## MOBILITY DECISION FACTORS FOR WOMEN (CONT.)

talking about leaving the land of her ancestors, the land that has provided for her and her family for many generations. She described a deep love and gratitude for the land.

Also in Tonga, one woman was in the process of leaving land she had been living on with her husband and family for 19 years. This was land and housing provided to her by the school she taught at. One of her main hesitations was the safety and community that the area provided their children and she worried whether she would be able to secure the same safe environment for her children in a new location.

In Samoa, one woman shared her motivations to leave customary land and take up a (20-year) lease of government land instead. She described wanting 'space' for her nuclear family, and distance from extended family and the traditional systems of governance in her home village. The two drawbacks she noted from the move was separation from her home church and community, and the cost and effort to establish a new plantation to grow their family food. A few women engaged in a village in Samoa shared their own desires to move to their 'own land' citing harsh Matai rules.

Another woman in Samoa with a long history of government work in social and community development shared how people are simply not in a financial position to start again. The fact that the most likely scenario for internal mobility would be that the whole aiga will move together means that the family also has to start again (e.g., there is no one to 'join' who has already started establishing a base). "Having to start again? People don't have the means – the means to have to redefine space and make ends meet too. People will be worse off... the government offers very little assistance."

Further, several women engaged in Samoa (and Tonga) noted that the general population is not psychologically prepared for change and emphasised that by far this will be the greatest challenge to overcome. One woman in Apia, Samoa shared her frustration at the resistance to discussing possible negative future scenarios, saying "I'm not sure people are ready to contemplate what that would look like. Because it's something negative. I think there is a fear element... but it is a typical Samoan psyche – we will cross that bridge when we get there." Another woman in Apia, Samoa, following a future visualisation session, shared how she came to the realisation that starting from scratch, particularly at her age of 70, would be very difficult. She believed that the most important thing to be doing now is broadening conversations about the future, what it could mean and what might be needed to prepare, saying "nothing beats a prepared mind."

The research included some participants who identify as fakaleiti/fa'afafine in both Tonga and Samoa. In Tonga, those participants were asked specifically about their thoughts on future mobility scenarios and unique barriers or challenges that fakaleiti may face. Two shared similar beliefs that the conservative nature of Tongan culture makes social acceptance by others difficult, saying that throughout their lives they have consciously taken on roles and jobs in the community that would make them more 'valuable' to others – e.g., working in government roles where they could support people with paperwork or information – in the hope that this would smooth the way for equal social status. They also shared that many fakaleiti have lower schooling attainment due to bullying, possibly affording them less adaptation capacity (e.g., through employment options) in mobility scenarios. Due to challenges with social acceptance in Tonga, and the relatively higher social and legal openness of places like New Zealand and Australia, these fakaleiti were of the strong opinion that given the option, most identifying as fakaleiti would prefer to move overseas rather than within Tonga. One shared their enthusiasm at the thought of moving to Aotearoa New Zealand "you have all the honey and cheeses!"

## KEY MOBILITY IMPACTS FOR WOMEN

*"All my koloa, the waves took them. They were all gone." 'Atataa Si'i, Tonga*

*"I miss my small business... we used to sell crafts down on the main road... now we sell car air fresheners and other cheap things outside supermarkets." Lalomanu, Samoa*

1. Kolomotu'a translates somewhat to 'old town' – and the inhabitants are said to be descended from the first King of Tonga – a demi-God – named 'Aho'aitu.

Many women affected by relocation events in Tonga (e.g., those from Mango, 'Atataa) shared their number one ongoing concern was a loss of their usual mode of earning income. All raised the issue of no longer being able to access pandanus plants/leaves left them without any means to be productive, fulfil their roles and maintain a level of self-reliance. One woman, relocated from 'Atataa and who was residing at the time in a church hall in Tongatapu shared how she is a skilled weaver and used to be weaving constantly back in 'Atataa. She shared that she could make TOP\$1,000 for every ta'ovala she wove. She was widowed a few decades earlier, and with her children working and living their own lives she said she was just worried about her own future. She wished to move on from 'Atataa, but with no clarity at the time about whether she would be allocated a home, and with those in leadership not sharing the location of her small housing allotment in 'Atataa Si'i, she felt she was in a hopeless limbo, saying "here we do nothing... I want to work!"

One woman, based in the new village of 'Atataa Si'i shared how the loss of her koloa had a big impact on her, repeating how they were all washed away "I had three that were 15ft long, all gone." Deepening the loss of koloa was the loss of her, and others, capacity to fulfil their roles for their family and community. No longer able to provide the appropriate koloa for different social events and occasions created a deep shame. This sense of despair was highlighted by pre-eminent academic and poet Professor Konai Thaman, who explained that a Tongan only realises the deepest of shame when s/he has nothing (koloa) to give<sup>1</sup>. Recognising this distress, village leadership publicly announced that the women there would not be expected to provide koloa for different occasions, which she said lifted a significant burden.

Another woman, from Mango, now residing in Mango-'Eua in 'Eua, shared how life has changed similarly for her. She shared how she used to be busy all the time in Mango preparing pandanus materials for weaving. In 'Eua though she had no access to pandanus plants and lamented the fact that all she (and most other women) does now is look after the grandchildren and sleep. She also shared that prior to relocation their village was very much a church-going community but now they don't even do that.

In a women's workshop in Lalomanu, Samoa, women shared their reflections on what challenges and impacts they have faced since relocating following the 2009 tsunami. Many highlighted ongoing concerns with services connection – particularly water - and the impacts that was having on health and hygiene in the village. Greater than that however seemed to be a deep concern about changes to income options given their new inland base. Many reported that they used to have small businesses selling crafts and seafood down at the main (coastal) road which provided them good income. Being much further inland (and upland), they lost easy access to the sea and sea food, and critically, they have lost access to the traffic of potential customers for their crafts and other wares they would sell roadside. One woman shared that as a family they now sell knick-knacks (like car air fresheners) outside the supermarket instead. Being further from the main road meant that families also lost easy access to transport into urban centres for work. Though they were grateful for new sealed roads up to their 'new' village, they mostly lacked access to cars and so they and their children faced great distances to walk to school now.

When remembering times before they relocated, they described generally being happier as a community and as families, spending time playing with children in the ocean for instance. Now, many of the women shared challenging stories about greater levels of domestic violence in the home, reportedly mostly driven by financial worries. The issue of increased domestic violence following relocation came up frequently in the women's workshop, with some women wishing for greater implementation of domestic violence laws to protect the women in the village. In one-on-one talanoa with other women in Samoa, including those in government and academia, they shared similar sentiments about the issue of violence against women, particularly during times of uncertainty and disaster. One shared "women are vulnerable to the... tendency to resort to violence. Change brings that out in people – it manifests in violence." Another woman shared this perspective and related it to an 'unaddressed history of violence in Samoa'.

Some women felt that their relocation was overall positive. In talanoa with some women in the relocated village of Satitooa in the Aleipata district, one woman shared a strong sense of contentment and gratitude for the changes, including how they have better quality amenities now ("the new school is beautiful for the children") and the newly sealed roads up to their (new) plantation land is much better than what they had prior to relocation. This woman also shared that in rebuilding the village inland and upland, they had an opportunity to spread out the houses slightly which she saw as a good thing "we don't need to see what everyone is having for their meals!"

1. In Vaoileti, T. M. (2011). *Talanoa, manulua and founa ako: Frameworks for using enduring Tongan educational ideas for education in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Doctoral dissertation, University of Waikato)*.



*Woman residing in church hall in Tongatapu following relocation from 'Atataa, 2023*

## WOMEN AND RESILIENCE

*"I think about what keeps us strong, what empowers us... its love for family and its love of the land." Tonga*

*"The more experience we have [with natural forces/disaster] the more knowledge we have. The more knowledge we have, the more we have skills [to survive]" Tonga*

*"People should be reminded of the difference between academic intelligence and wisdom to live in a community." Tonga*

*"I would tell women, educate yourselves for better opportunities, and learn to live with the change" Samoa*

The women engaged in this research were asked about what contributes to their resilience, particularly in the face of frequent natural disasters and progressive climate stress. The concept of resilience was a challenging one to approach in the first instance. Many women in Tonga and Samoa shared that it wasn't something that they had considered specifically before - that the idea that one had a choice but to be 'resilient' - i.e., it was assumed that in the face of challenges one simply carries on.

Some connected with the idea of 'bouncing back' after a set-back and many in Samoa in particular referenced their faith/religion and God as being a source of power and emphasised the importance of regular church attendance. Women in Samoa also referenced how critical it is to adhere to and ensure the continuance of the traditional way of Samoan life and the values of fa'a Samoa, like respect. This was seen to be central to a peaceful and happy life (for all).

Women in Tonga also referenced the importance of living traditional values for resilience. A senior woman who took part in the future scenarios session concluded that a return to traditional Tongan values would be critical to support those remaining in Tonga in various futures of greater climate stress, believing that values of e.g., 'ofa (love), faka'apa'apa (respect) would help secure critical social harmony and self-reliance in the face of challenging externalities. One woman, a leader in business and a member of a senior family in Tonga shared how fakapotopoto - being resourceful, conscientious with one's e.g., financial resources but also with one's time - is something that had been instilled in them by their mother from a young age. She described how her family living this value contributes tangibly to their resilience and has underpinned resilience-building decisions she has taken - like establishing savings and building a second residence for their family on their tax allotment/plantation for relocation should they need it.

Others spoke about family being their source of motivation in the face of challenges. That family keep them in place and that their love for family, and love from family, empowers them to continue. Though not labelling it specifically, women in Tonga and Samoa shared how they retain overseas mobility options should they need it, secure in the belief that family overseas would support them to move should they need it. Others shared that they have and would continue to lean on overseas family to support future rebuilds in Tonga and Samoa as needed.

In Tongatapu, women spoke about a deep love for the land itself and a strong sense of obligation to return the love and care that the land has provided them (and family passed). Also in Tonga, one woman spoke about how with each tropical cyclone that has impacted their village, they gain more experience and knowledge which in turn helps them respond more effectively to subsequent disasters.

In Samoa, women shared other thoughts on contributors to well-being. Many in Lalomanu village emphasised the importance of being able fulfil their role within the family and the village for well-being. Of note, this was discussed through a lens of broader well-being, i.e., women in this village did not immediately consider what contributed to their individual well-being. The default consideration was ensuring they played their part in establishing broader well-being for the aiga and village. For many that included their role as mothers raising the children and looking after the family. Several women highlighted that they 'live through their children', mentioning that the well-being and betterment of their children was central to their lives and own well-being.

With encouragement, women in the village of Lalomanu shared that being able to practice their craft, like weaving in group settings (e.g., women's groups) and being able to both observe and share their knowledge in that way was an important contributor to well-being.

## LOOKING FORWARD WITH PRAGMATISM

*"If we have to, women will move. These conversations are important because women will need some time to change their mindset." Tonga*

*"I think we will adapt, our ingenuity will pull us through. We are projecting into the future with what we know and are used to now, but maybe things were not meant to be fixed anyway." Samoa*

*"It's time to forget about Mango." Tonga*

Overwhelmingly, the takeaway was that women in Tonga and Samoa are and would be pragmatic in a situation that required decisions or action on mobility. Most women engaged through this project appeared to undergo a process during the group or one-on-one talanoa, starting from a place of resistance or anxiety regarding possible future mobility and ending at a place of relative acceptance. Many women ended talanoa (or approached us following a group talanoa or workshop) saying that women, though hesitant at first, will ultimately do what is needed to be done. Some shared perspectives that they and others, though likely to face emotional, spiritual and practical barriers to mobility, will 'just need to change our minds and move on'. This pragmatism came through clearly in the words of those women who had been relocated following the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai eruption. Further, the sense was that it was the women in the family (whether playing the role of the mother, wife, both or other) who was leading the push to move forward and move on mentally following mobility.

One woman living with her husband now on 'Eua shared how her husband continues to talk about missing Mango island and their life which revolved around fishing there. She says she now tells him that it is time to forget about Mango. Women from 'Atataa shared how they are either 'losing interest' in 'Atataa and are now looking towards their new lives in Tongatapu. One woman whose husband is buried in 'Atataa expressed no interest in relocating his remains to be where she now is. Another woman shared that she does not wish to return to 'Atataa – partly through fear of ongoing risk, the trauma of the memories of what happened there, but also because she is content in where she and her family are now in 'Atataa Si'i, and her focus is on continuing to establish their lives there.

This sense of acceptance, though in a different context, was shared by a woman in Patangata – an area known to be particularly exposed to sea water inundation and high tides – saying "I'm sure the government will [eventually] tell us to move. But I'm just saying, my heart will remain here."

In Samoa, women in Lalomanu village, though already relocated inland and upland just over a decade ago, shared their assumption that their village will continue to retreat from the coast in the coming decades due to progressive climate change impacts. Someone who identifies as fa'afafine in Samoa shared their sense that Samoans will adapt to whatever futures are realised, and hoped that a return to some of the traditional values, worldviews and self-reliance would stand their people in good stead for those future/s.



## SOME THOUGHTS ON NEXT STEPS

Many women in Samoa and Tonga highlighted the importance of mental preparation for future mobility scenarios, starting as soon as possible. Given the central roles of women in decision-making and decision-influence, family preparation and coordination, social connectedness and cultural protection and continuance, it would make good sense to engage women in broader preparatory discussions as soon as possible.

A number of opportunities were highlighted through this research to support women in existing climate resilience and leadership roles, and explicit requests were also received for practical help to improve mobility choice for women (and their families), such as access to relatively low-cost solid rock in order to raise homes persistently caught in pluvial flooding.

Further engagement with women on the impacts of mobility, over time, would be warranted, including further follow up with women engaged through this research who have undergone mobility (e.g., the communities of Lalomanu, Satitoo and Leauva'a in Samoa, and 'Atataa and Mango in Tonga). Targeted engagement with women remaining in place, such as in Patangata and Lelata would also continue to reveal critical insights on contributors to e.g., involuntary immobility.





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