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"Despite the myriad challenges they face, rural women are helping define Pacific resilience today," said The Pacific Community (SPC) Director-General Dr Colin Tukuitonga on the eve of International Women's Day. "Like their counterparts around the world, rural women in the Pacific Islands region certainly do not have it easy. They often lack access to basic services and infrastructure such as water and sanitation, electricity, health and education. They are more at risk of domestic violence and unwanted pregnancies than women in urban areas. Rural women are also more exposed to the adverse impacts of climate change like cyclones and droughts," Dr Tukuitonga said.

Building on the momentum of International Women's Day 2018, SPC is reiterating its commitment to work alongside Pacific Island governments to improve the lives and livelihoods of Pacific rural women. "The Pacific Community works in more than 20 sectors and is renowned for knowledge and innovation in areas such as fisheries science, public health surveillance, geoscience, and conservation of plant genetic resources for food security to name a few. Our programmes inevitably impact rural women, whether through policy development or capacity building on the ground. We recognized early on through our work on gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment that the needs, concerns and the knowledge of Pacific rural women is critical to achieving the region's development goals. Whilst we strive to provide impactful technical support on the ground, we also seek to utilize and engage with rural women networks

and organisations because they are often organized and would know how to mobilize around pertinent issues we face today such as climate change and natural disasters," Dr Tukuitonga said.

Research undertaken by SPC in Fiji, after Cyclone Winston showed that women were increasingly taking over roles of men in villages, as men had to move into towns to look for work. At the height of cyclone Winston, community health workers who are mostly women, in all villages affected by the cyclone found themselves in desperate situations as the wounded came to them for medical attention as roads and bridges to the nearest health centers were blocked by fallen trees or electricity poles.

Despite this Pacific rural women show great tenacity and resilience when it comes to living and working in their environment. Pacific rural women walk miles to custom bush gardens to grow food for their families and they work for hours gleaning marine life to sell in the market to earn an income for their families. Yet, rural women in the Pacific face some of the biggest development challenges. On average in the region, 50% of ever partnered rural women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence. In Fiji, 60% of rural women compared to 27% of urban women are in vulnerable employment. Intense outreach and focus on adolescent sexual and reproductive health information and services is needed for Pacific youth and in particular rural young women. Despite a decline in teenage pregnancy across the Pacific, fertility rates amongst 15-19 year old women tend to be significantly higher in rural than in urban areas.

"International Women's Day is a time to reflect on the remarkable diversity of women in the Pacific and their individual and collective experiences, as well as the many ways in which development organisations like SPC can make a meaningful and lasting contribution to their lives," said Dr Tukuitonga. The empowerment of rural women and girls will be a priority theme at the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the United Nations Headquaters in New York from 12 to 23 March. SPC will be supporting the Pacific islands delegates to raise awareness of the global community on the priorities of Pacific women and to share their experiences and concerns in building resilient communities through their participation in side events and panel discussions. SPC will also support Pacific Island countries in the negotiations of the agreed conclusions which will outline the priorities at the global level for empowering rural women and girls.

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