



GENDER EQUALITY, DISABILITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon 2024



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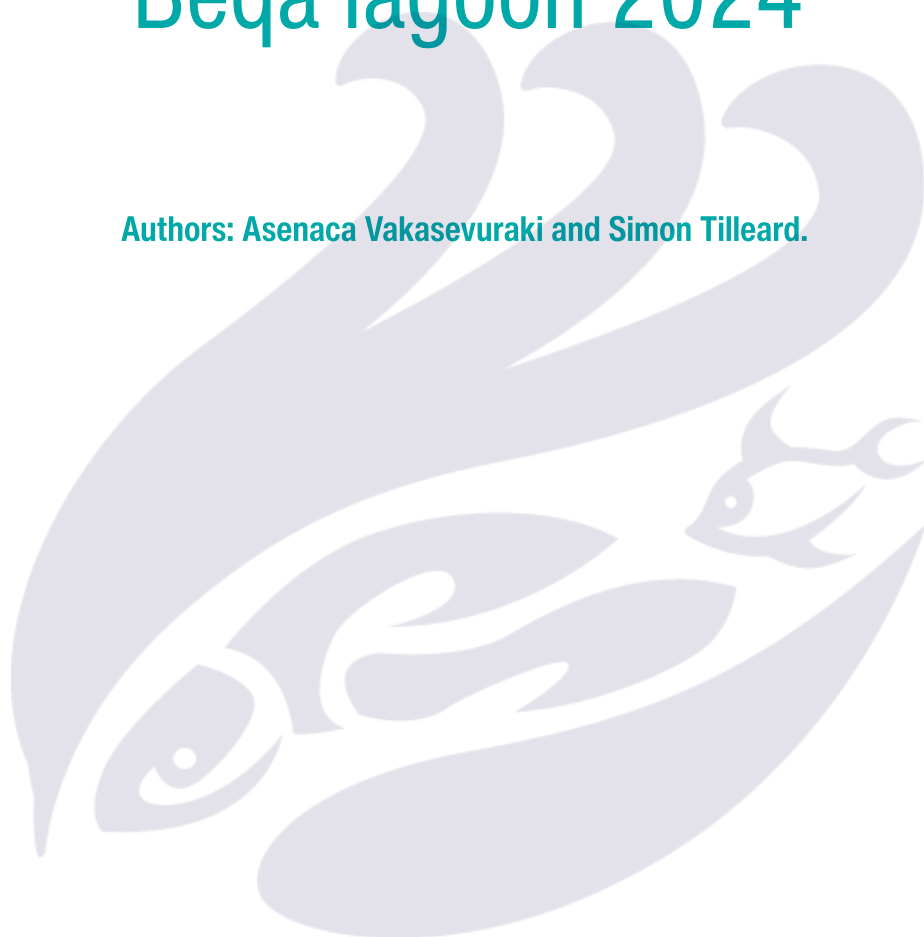
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This document forms part of a series of studies and consultations with the people of Fiji who live within the Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon. The work culminated in the development of an Integrated Ecosystem Management Plan for the Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon and is testament to the commitment of these communities to prosper sustainably and in harmony with their natural ecosystems. We thank and acknowledge all the communities within the catchment and lagoon who supported development of the plan. The Government of Fiji supported the development of this plan through input and review from several government agencies including the three provincial governments and various line ministries.

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Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Situational Analysis: Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon 2024

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Acronyms

BIORAP	Biological rapid assessment
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
COT	Crown-of-thorns starfish
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DIVA	Diverse Voices and Action
DPSBR	Driver-Pressure-State-Benefits-Response
EbA	Ecosystem-based Adaptation
ESRAM	Ecosystem and Socioeconomic Resilience Analysis and Mapping
ESVOA	Environmental and Socioeconomic Vulnerability and Opportunity Assessment
FCGA	Fiji Country Gender Assessment
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
GSI	Gender and Social Inclusion
IEMP	Integrated Ecosystem Management Plan
NAP	National Action Plan
NbS	Nature-based Solutions
NEC	National Employment Centre
NTF	Non-Timber Forest Products
PEUMP	Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership
PSSA	Particularly Sensitive Sea Area
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SOGIESC	Sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristic
SPC	The Pacific Community
SPREP	Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme

1 Introduction

1.1 The project

The Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) Programme promotes sustainable management and sound ocean governance for food security and economic growth, while addressing climate change resilience and conservation of marine biodiversity. It follows a comprehensive approach, integrating issues related to oceanic fisheries, coastal fisheries, community development, marine conservation and capacity building under one single regional action. The PEUMP is built around six Key Result Areas (KRA).

Designed to meet KRA 5 of the PEUMP, the By-catch and Integrated Ecosystem Management (BIEM) Initiative is led by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) to support Pacific countries deliver their priorities to halt the decline of protected marine species, strengthen the sustainable management of their coastal and marine ecosystems and support poverty reduction. The objective of the BIEM Initiative is "to reduce the by-catch of threatened species in Pacific islands' fisheries and to improve the health of coastal ecosystems through an integrated approach to coastal management and ecosystem-based adaptation to climate change".

The current project underpins KRA 5.2 and 5.3 of the BIEM, which focus on supporting adoption of Integrated 'ridge to reef' ecosystem management and climate change adaptation. To support these KRAs the project seeks to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of the Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon by halting the decline of biodiversity and strengthening the sustainable management of the coastal and marine ecosystems through an integrated ridge to reef management approach.

Specifically, this project aims to:

"Address these challenges by developing and implementing a gender, social inclusion (GSI) and human rights sensitive integrated ecosystem management (IEM) plan for Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon area, Central Province, that identifies realistic activities to increase the natural adaptive capacity of coastal habitats to promote human health and poverty reduction, support sustainable livelihoods and contribute to the delivery of Fiji's conservation priorities."

Drawing from the project brief, the objectives of the project include:

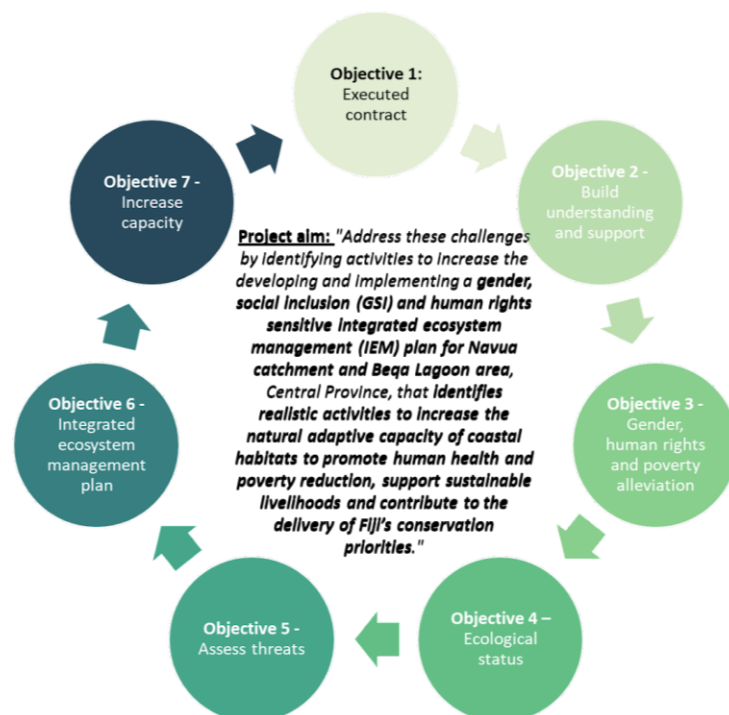
Objective 1 – Fully executed contract that delivers objectives and associated outputs to time and quality.

Objective 2 – Build understanding and support for the Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon area ridge to reef initiative amongst communities and stakeholders.

Objective 3 – Put gender, human rights and poverty alleviation considerations at the heart of the planning and implementation of activities.

Objective 4 – Map and assess the ecological status of the selected coastal area and associated catchments that coastal communities depend upon for their livelihoods.

Objective 5 – Assess the threats to ecosystems, livelihoods and human health as a result of current/planned resource use and the expected impacts of climate change and identify opportunities to address them. In doing so, identify key users of selected coastal areas and associated catchments by gender, age, disability, ethnicity and socioeconomic status Apply a GSI lens when identifying threats and risks as well as opportunities for best adaptation.



Objective 6 – Develop and secure endorsement of a widely supported integrated ecosystem management plan for the Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon area that identifies realistic activities to increase the natural adaptive capacity of coastal habitats to promote human health and poverty reduction, support sustainable livelihoods and contribute to the delivery of Fiji’s conservation priorities.

Objective 7 – Work with and increase the capacity of women, men and the youth in coastal communities, government authorities and partners to actively manage natural resources. Identify appropriate capacity building activities carefully with regards to existing power dynamics and gender roles as to meet the ‘do no harm’ minimum standard. Capacity building opportunities should allow, however, for empowerment and agency enhancement such as building confidence through knowledge and training or support inclusive decision making.

1.2 Purpose of this report

This report presents a situational analysis prepared as part of Objective 3. The situational analysis provides an overview of local governance and stakeholders; the socio-economic circumstances of communities and stakeholders in the focal area; past, existing and planned initiatives; and key risks and issues. The aim of the situational analysis is to establish a baseline understanding so that gender, human rights and poverty alleviation considerations can be made central to the IEMP development.

1.3 Methodology

The situational analysis presented in this report is informed by literature reviews in addition to consultations in six villages within the catchment and lagoon.

2 Local governance and stakeholders

1.4 Governance structure

Governance structure

The indigenous Fijian social system underpinning governance in the Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon is based on the concept of vanua, which relates to the land and is the largest grouping of kinsmen. This social system is structured into various social units, which are considered “the living or human manifestation of the physical environment which the members have since claimed to belong to and to which they also belong” (Ravuvu 1983). The yavusa is one such social unit and consists of people from the same village. Within the yavusa, there are further subdivisions known as mataqali, which are clans; and tokatoka, which are sub-clans. The mataqali serves as a landowning unit and is made up of several tokatoka (Ravuvu 1983). The tokatoka, being the key social division, further branches out into family units. This hierarchical structure of the Fijian social system is crucial in defining kinship relationships and landownership within the indigenous Fijian community (Ravuvu 1983) (Figure 1).

Village headmen act as a direct link between the district and provincial agencies and the local communities. They are appointed by the community through a village meeting and serve as the focal point and representative of their community. As paid government officials, their main role is to work closely with district level representatives to advocate for development, addressing community concerns, and ensuring effective communication and coordination by the local communities. The village headmen play a crucial role in bridging the gap between the governing bodies and the grassroots level, conveying the needs, aspirations and problems of their community and providing updates and information to the community regarding government policies, programmes and initiatives. In terms of development, the village headmen collaborate with the district level representatives to identify and prioritise projects that are crucial for the village development, ensure that the community's needs are taken into consideration during the planning and implementation of these projects, and assist in monitoring and evaluating the progress of the projects.

Within a community, several committees cover important areas such as education and natural environment (Figure 2). Village meetings are the main forum to raise concerns, updates and progress of development in the community by respective committees. The village headman will inform the Provincial Council through monthly reports that are endorsed by the district level representative.

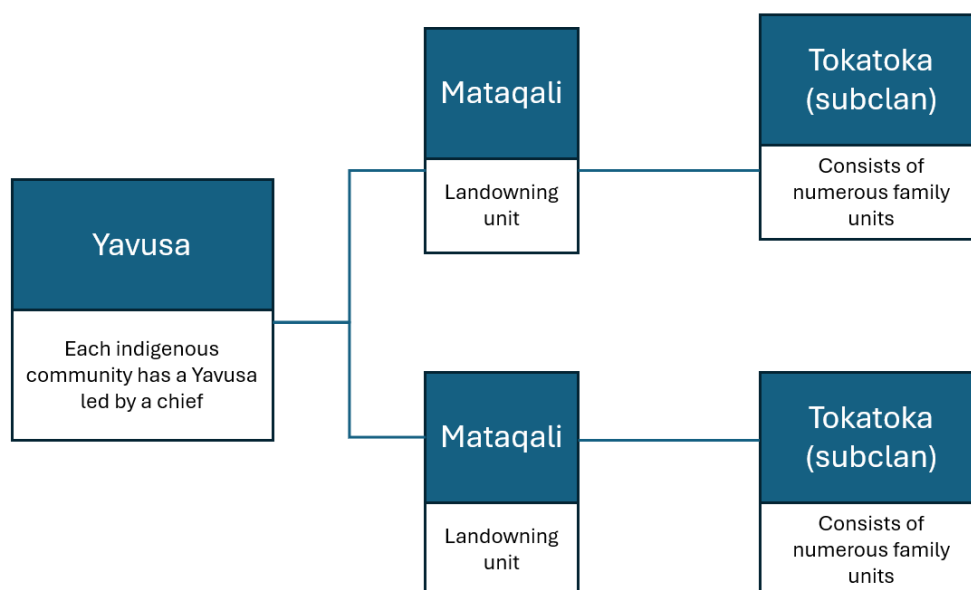


Figure 1. An illustration of the Fijian social system

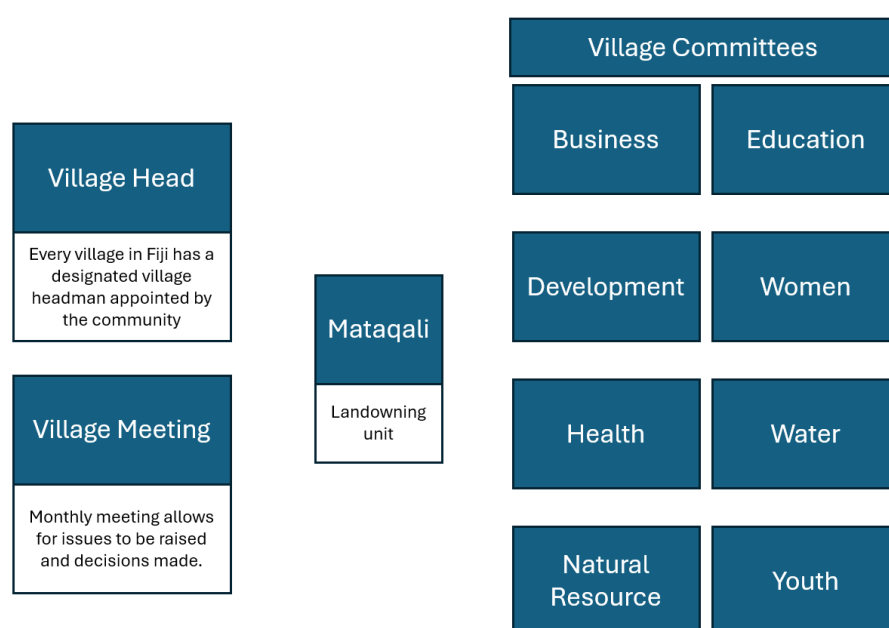


Figure 2. Village level governance structures in the Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon

Gender implications of governance structure

Unequal access to land and resources has a significant impact on women's economic empowerment and autonomy in Fiji including in the Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon. It limits their ability to participate in income-generating activities, as well as their decision making power within their households and communities. The lack of access to land impacts security for women's and marginalised groups and leads to an increased risk of homelessness in cases of marital separation. Without ownership or control over land, women often struggle to provide shelter for themselves and their children.

Gender inequalities are further perpetuated in the fishing industry. Despite women dominating the inshore and freshwater fisheries, respectively accounting for 51 percent and 94 percent of fishers, men have almost exclusive control of fishing grounds, exacerbating existing gender disparities and further limiting women's economic potential (Government of Fiji 2021).

1.5 Key stakeholders

There are several key stakeholders that need to be engaged in the development of the IEMP including local communities, government agencies, civil society organisations and the private sector (Table 1).

Table 1. Key Stakeholders

Stakeholder group	Assumptions and risks
Local Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community members may rally not to support the Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon IEMP as it may limit the development and future economic activities High turn-over of resource committee assigned to monitor IEMP due to employment initiative (NEC Fiji) IEMP could be advocated and marketed by schools, youth and women's groups in the community
Government Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government agencies have overlapping plans that do not integrate well with the IEMP Lack of resources and staff to consistently monitor progress of IEMP

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IEMP integrates into government agency plans monitored by District Officers that meets key result areas
Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through engagement, existing CSOs could be supportive of IEMP initiatives to be implemented in the province. • There could be backlash from CSOs that have a long-standing jurisdiction and community engagement, if they are not supportive
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support from primary schools could be obtained in ensuring districts uphold the IEMP through experiential learning
Religious Institutions (RI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support from RI in ensuring districts uphold the IEMP could be obtained
Private Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IEMP hinders progress of private sector whose main source of income is from the surrounding Navua catchment and Beqa lagoon

The following governance and stakeholder insights were gained from initial engagement with stakeholders during consultations at six villages in November 2023:

Local communities

- The local communities have a basic understanding of ecosystem-based management, however there are limitations to alternative sources of income as they heavily rely on natural resources for livelihood and development.
- With a high turnover of the resource committee, the local communities along with Provincial Council support, ensure district level youth, women and natural resource management committee are present in consultations.
- A collaborative approach between local communities, Provincial Council, Youth Administrators/Coordinators and District Education Officers will be needed to ensure the IEMP is advocated and marketed to schools, youths and women's groups in the community.
- A key concern expressed by the elders was the fading of knowledge about flora and fauna based on ecosystem type, as well as traditional knowledge that is often passed down through oral traditions. The younger generation, it seems, does not find interest in this type of information sharing. By using the talanoa approach (see description below), the community was able to create a space where the older generation could share their knowledge with the younger generation, allowing for the preservation and transmission of valuable cultural and environmental wisdom.

Government agencies

- Government agencies can benefit from aligning the IEMP with provincial council Integrated Village Development plans, as it enables effective monitoring of the implementation and impact of the IEMP.
- From the IEMP development, the Government of Fiji can make submissions of changes to ineffective legislations that hinder effectiveness of integrated resource management (freshwater, riparian, marine and coastal).
- By aligning the IEMP with the Integrated Village Development plans, government agencies can ensure that the environmental goals and objectives of the IEMP are integrated into broader development initiatives. This alignment allows for better coordination and collaboration among various departments and agencies involved in the implementation of the plans.
- Government agencies can collaborate with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to raise awareness in local communities and foster a culture of environmental sustainability among schools, youths, women's groups. CSOs are a key advocate for change and allow for reinforced behaviour change communication.

Religious teachers and leaders

- Consultations with religious teachers and leaders are important to ensure that the integration of IEMP initiatives aligns with the principles and beliefs of the specific religious institution. This collaborative

approach will not only increase the effectiveness of the initiatives but also foster a sense of ownership and commitment among the religious community.

- The religious institutions can use their influence to spread awareness and encourage behaviour change within the local communities. By disseminating IEMP messages during religious gatherings, sermons, or events, they can reach a large number of people and inspire them to adopt more sustainable lifestyles. The involvement of religious teachers, especially women and elders, is crucial in this process. Their leadership and guidance can have a significant impact on students and community members. They can serve as role models and mentors, instilling values of environmental responsibility and empathy towards nature in the younger generations.

Engagement and consultations

- The engagement of a talanoa" approach during focus group discussions can significantly improve participation and information sharing among participants. The talanoa" approach is a communication method commonly used in Pacific island cultures, which emphasises inclusivity, trust-building, and an open and respectful dialogue (Vaiotele 2006).
- The talanoa is centred around storytelling and sharing experiences. In the context of surveys, community mapping, ecosystem and socioeconomic resilience mapping (ESRAM) and the environment and socioeconomic vulnerability and opportunity assessment (ESVOA), the talanoa approach was used to facilitate discussions and information sharing between the older and younger generations in the community.
- By incorporating the talanoa approach, which encourages participants to share their stories and perspectives in their native language, participants felt more at ease and were more willing to engage in discussions. This finding has important implications for future workshops and conferences, especially in multicultural or multilingual settings. By recognising and valuing participants' language preferences and providing a space for open and inclusive dialogue, organisers can improve attendance rates and ensure that all participants can fully contribute their knowledge and experiences.



Figure 3. The talanoa is commonly used to encourage engagement during consultations

3 Socioeconomic circumstances of communities and stakeholders

The Navua River has a significant ecological and cultural importance to the people of Fiji, as it is deemed the third-largest freshwater catchment in Fiji with the upper part of the river cutting through a narrow gorge approximately 75 metres deep (varying width 5 m to 25 m) (Terry et al. 2002, UNCA-RIS 2006).

Beqa lagoon is the largest enclosed lagoon in Fiji and consists of over 440 square kilometres of clear waters surrounded by the protection of over 70 km of barrier reef (Pacific Blue Foundation 2019). Within this lush ecosystem are exceptional coral reefs, productive mangrove forests, diverse fish, charismatic megafauna (such as sharks, marine turtles and whales), and culturally rich indigenous communities. The healthy, productive ecosystem of Beqa lagoon contains six islands, inhabited by ~1,500 community members across 10 villages nestled within tropical rainforests on the coastlines of Beqa and Yanuca islands. The Beqa lagoon people have traditions embedded in the surrounding lands and waters, where fisheries and farming provide the main sources of food and income security for them (Pacific Blue Foundation 2019).

The 2017 census data for Fiji highlights a growing divide between urban and rural populations, with a substantial difference in population distribution, growth and development between the two populations. With urban areas experiencing significantly higher rates of growth compared to rural areas, many have emphasised the need for the further development of policies that address the disparities between the two populations. Unemployment, poverty and a lack of connectivity to the services provided within urbanised areas are highlighted as key issues being experienced by the rural population (Phillips and Keen 2016).

Population data from the 2017 census has been considered from the two provinces of Serua and Namosi, which combined, encompass the Navua catchment. This data provides the most up to date overview of the make-up of residents living within the catchment, as well as a comparison of residential demographics within the defined urban or rural regions.¹ As of 2017, there were 26,441 residents within the catchment area, of which 50.8 percent were male and 49.2 percent were female. This largely mirrors demographics calculated at the national level in 2017, with 50.7 percent male and 49.3 percent female (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

Figure 4 shows a breakdown by age groups of males and females within the catchment, noting that a larger proportion of males under the age of 20 are present, with the largest differential evident between residents aged 10 years to 19 years. In contrast, the older retiree demographic, particularly those past the age of 65 years, exhibit a slightly higher proportion of female residents. Overall, the decreasing trend of age groups within the catchment are reflective of trends generally exhibited in developing middle income countries, as opposed to countries with aging populations such as Australia, which display a larger proportion of the population between the ages of 20 years and 65 years.

This data corresponds with information shared from the local communities during consultations in November 2023 (Serua and Namosi) that their respective villages are undergoing a growth in population, creating significant challenges to village boundaries, and extending these boundaries beyond commercial and government designated leases is an urgent necessity. This extension will help accommodate the expanding needs of the population, provide essential services and infrastructure, and promote balanced economic and social development.

Key social trends for the catchment can also be demonstrated by comparing the proportion of residents living within urban regions with those in rural regions, while again emphasising that rural regions have historically shown much greater rates of unemployment, poverty and disconnect from services available to urban areas. Figure 5 demonstrates the significantly rural proportion of the population across all age groups, with youth under the age of 20 years having the strongest rural demographic. In total, 28.2 percent of the catchment resides in urban areas, compared to the national average recorded in 2017 of 55.9 percent. The catchment area can therefore be considered as largely rural, with most of the urban population (approximately 6,076 people) coming from the Navua township.

¹ These more granular geographic areas are defined as "Tikina", while a "ward" refers to a region's classification as either rural or urban.

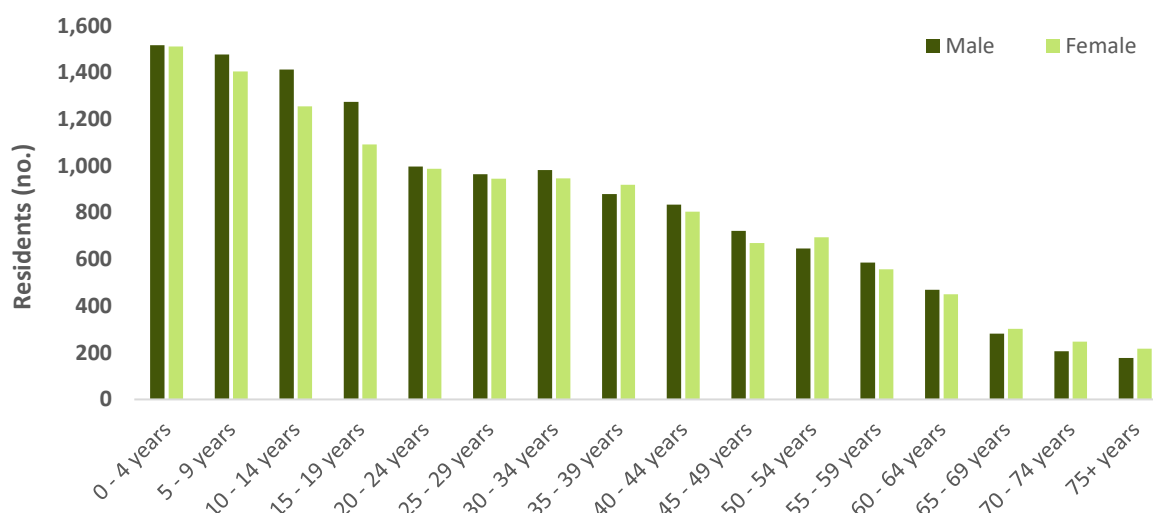


Figure 4. Male and female population in Navua catchment

This comparison of residents living within urban regions versus rural regions was confirmed during the November 2023 consultations. Consultations highlighted the disparities between urban and rural regions in terms of employment, poverty and access to services. They underscore the need for policies and interventions to address these inequalities and support development in rural areas. This is evident for the rural consultations that indicated a disconnect to telecommunication services (phone and internet) and inaccessible roads and crossings.

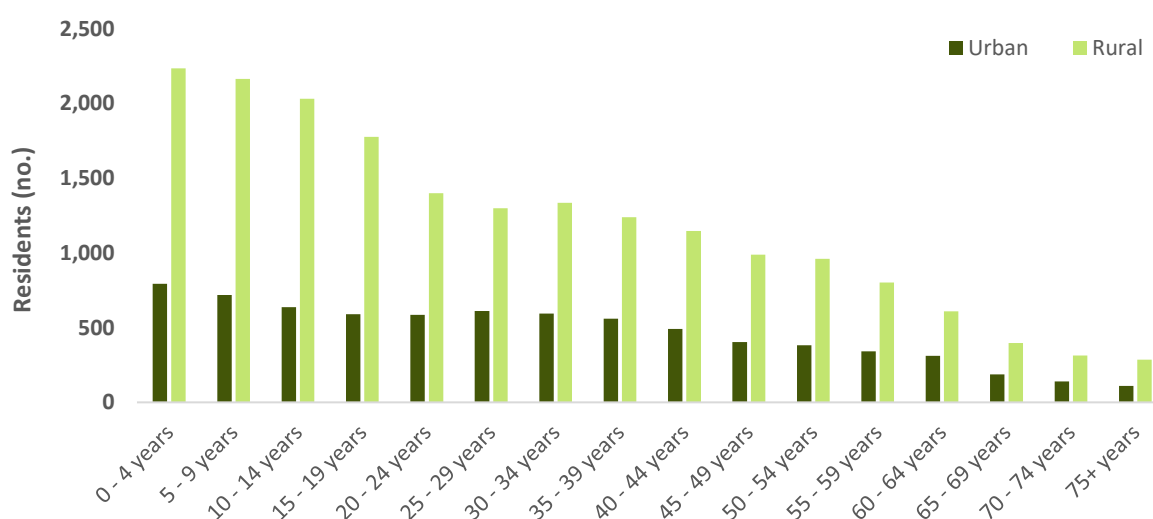


Figure 5. Urban and rural population within Navua catchment

Employment sectors have begun to transition within the catchment as farming and market conditions have changed. Although commercial rice farming was once prevalent in the floodplains of the Navua catchment, it is now limited to small-scale farming and grazing due to frequently occurring flood damage and the declining relative cost of imports since the 1990s (Pacific Water 2012). Currently, the agricultural activities in the area are limited to small-scale commercial and subsistence farming of vegetables, cash crops and grazing. Logging of mahogany and mining of river gravel are also significant industries (Pacific Water 2012).

Consultations in November 2023 confirmed that agricultural activities in the Beqa lagoon and Navua catchment are primarily small-scale commercial and subsistence farming, focusing on the cultivation of vegetables and cash crops. Additionally, logging of mahogany and mining of river gravel are significant industries. Local communities noted that mahogany is deteriorating water quality and soil fertility where these plants thrive and they often

regret planting mahogany. These agriculture activities have led to significant environmental damage, particularly in terms of channel degradation. As a result, the Upper Navua Gorge, which is an ecologically important area, has been designated as a conservation area to protect it from further harm.

Despite these challenges, the Navua River provides a source of tourism income for the surrounding region through cultural tours, village visits and river rafting, as well as providing an important transportation route in an area with few roads. The tourism industry is prominent within the coastal, riparian and island communities with village tours, rafting and staff providing income to local communities, as compared to the communities without tourism influence – they are slowly gaining interest to diversify their income as it links directly to their natural resources.

A range of socioeconomic indicators has been measured from the 2017 census for households and residents living within the Navua catchment, presented in Table 2. Key differences when compared against the national average include the higher proportion of privately owned households within the catchment, as well as the higher rates of households with electricity access in the catchment. Additionally, although over half of households within the catchment (55.2 percent) reported having occasional or frequent water supply exhaustion, this was 13 percent lower than the national average. Fijian born ethnicity makes up more than two-thirds of the population within the catchment, and although a higher proportion of students attend kindergartens or primary schools in the catchment compared to the national average, a slightly lower proportion of students will attend secondary schools (noting that of this group, males have worse attendance rates than females).



Figure 6. A community along the Navua River

Table 2. Socioeconomic indicators within Navua catchment in 2017

Socioeconomic Indicator	Catchment proportion (%)	Fiji proportion (%)
<i>% of households in catchment</i>		
Farming household	55.5%	65.0%
Rent house – Private	8.9%	14.2%
Own house	80.2%	74.1%
Households with access to electricity	92.7%	88.9%
Occasional or frequent water supply exhaustion	55.2%	68.2%
<i>% of population in Catchment</i>		
Fijian ethnic origin*	68.8%	56.8%
Indian ethnic origin*	25.2%	37.5%
Kindergarten/Primary School attendance	14.9%	13.3%
Male	15.3%	13.6%
Female	14.6%	13.0%
Secondary school attendance	11.0%	11.7%
Male	10.7%	11.5%
Female	11.4%	11.9%

Key labour force data collected in 2017 also provides insightful commentary on socioeconomic standings within the larger Central Division encompassing the Navua catchment.² Total unemployment rates within the Central Division recorded 5.2 percent, higher than the 4.5 percent national average, although there is substantial disparity evident when comparing unemployment levels between urban and rural regions as well as males and females. Figure 7 presents these differences, with urban regions of the Central Division recording much higher rates of unemployment compared to rural regions for both males and females. Females also experienced much higher unemployment rates compared to males for both rural and urban areas.

² Labour and employment data was not available at the province level and therefore accuracy constraints for this dataset should be noted. The Central Division that includes the Navua catchment contains 625,099 (or 43.0%) of Fiji's working population over the age of 15 years. The Navua catchment contains a small subset of this with 17,860 working age residents, equivalent to 2.9% of the Central Division.



Figure 7. Unemployment rates in Central Division

Employment data released in 2019 for the Central Division is presented in Figure 8, with wholesale retail and trade, manufacturing, and administration and defence/social security making up 45.4 percent of employment in the region. Employment industries are largely comparable to national averages except for within the accommodation and food service industry, which are largely focused in the Western Division.

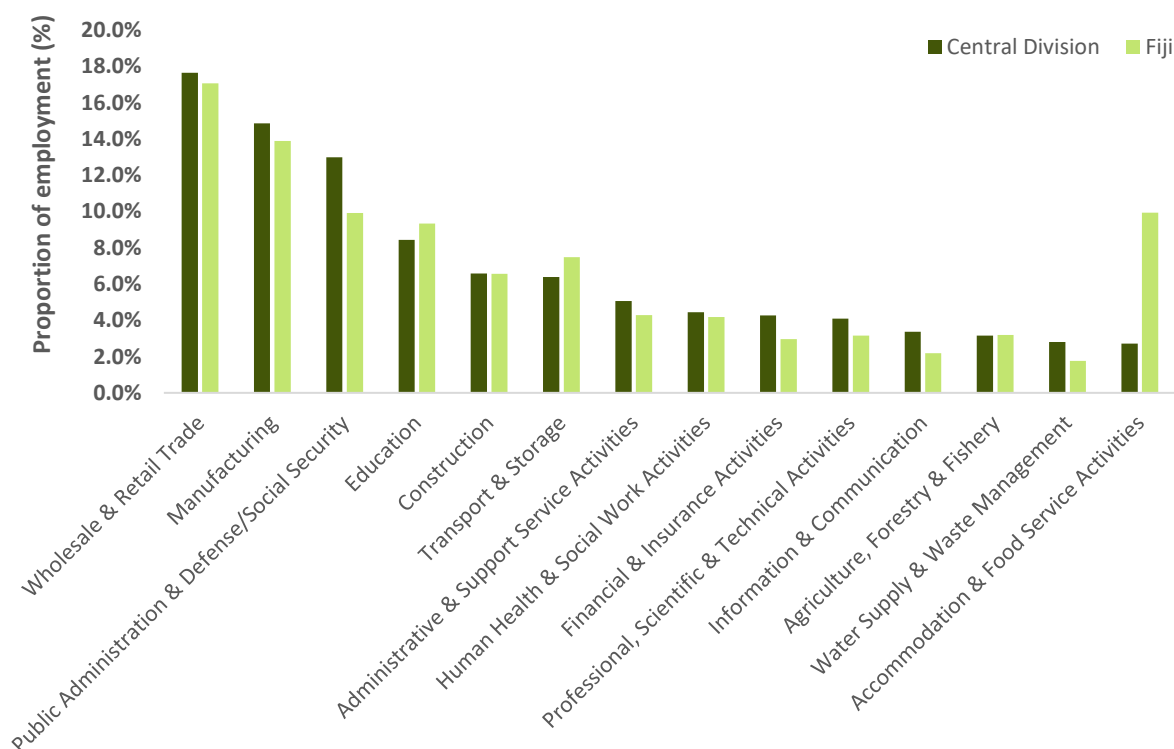


Figure 8. Employment sectors in Central Division

4 Past, existing and planned initiatives in relation to gender, human rights and poverty alleviation

It is important that the IEMP builds on existing policies and processes where possible and relevant. Key past, existing and planned gender, human rights and poverty alleviation initiatives that the IEMP can build on are outlined below.

Fiji Constitution

The 1997 Fiji Constitution serves as a cornerstone for promoting a just, inclusive and rights-respecting society. By embedding principles of equality, non-discrimination and respect for human rights in the constitutional framework, Fiji demonstrates its commitment to upholding the fundamental freedoms and dignity of all individuals within its jurisdiction. The constitutional provisions serve as the foundational framework for upholding the rights and dignity of all individuals within the country.

The establishment of the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission under the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji (Promulgation) Act 2013, empowers the Commission to undertake the following responsibilities: a) promoting the protection and observance of, and respect for, human rights in public and private institutions, and to, b) develop a culture of human rights in Fiji; c) education about the rights and freedoms recognised in this Chapter, as well as other internationally recognized rights and freedoms; d) monitoring, investigating, and reporting on the observance of human rights in all spheres of life; e) making recommendations to the Government concerning matters affecting the rights and freedoms recognized, including recommendations concerning existing or proposed laws; f) receiving and investigating complaints about alleged abuses of human rights and take steps to secure appropriate redress if human rights have been violated, including making applications to court for redress or for other forms of relief or remedies; g) investigating or researching, on its own initiative or on the basis of a complaint, any matter in respect of human rights, and make recommendations to improve the functioning of public or private entities; h) monitoring compliance by the State with obligations under treaties and conventions relating to human rights; and i) performing any other functions or exercising any powers as are conferred on the Commission by a written law (Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission, 2020).

The Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection provides key support to women, children and marginalised individuals in society, such as social pension scheme, care and protection allowance, family service scheme, bus fare concession, rural pregnant mothers, disability allowance scheme and welfare graduation programme (Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection 2024).

Constitutional recognition – A regional perspective

Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu guarantee equality before the law³ and Tuvalu guarantees freedom under the law.⁴ These terms have been interpreted by courts and commentators alike to require the application of formal equality but not substantive equality in noncompliance with Article 2 of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The constitutions of Papua New Guinea, Kiribati and the Solomon Islands do not contain any equality clauses.⁵

The constitutional recognition of custom and traditional practices in the Pacific islands, without specific limits on discrimination, poses a significant challenge to legal reforms to promote human rights and equality. Throughout the Pacific region, numerous practices considered 'customary or traditional' are reinforcing discrimination against women. For example, *bulubulu* in Fiji and *ifoga* in Samoa are reconciliation practices deeply ingrained in the social context of these countries. These symbolic gestures of apologies, forms of compensation (valuables or shell money) as well as ceremonies (prayers and feasts), can conflict with principles of gender equality and non-discrimination and advancement of human rights (Jivan and Forster 2009).

³ Constitution of the Republic of the Fiji Islands 1997

⁴ Constitution of Tuvalu 1986 (Tuvalu) s 10.

⁵ Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea 1975 (PNG); Constitution of Kiribati 1979 (Kiribati); Constitution of the Solomon Islands 1978 (Solomon Islands).

The Policy for Gender in Agriculture in Fiji (2022–2027)

The Policy for Gender in Agriculture in Fiji (2022–2027) has been developed as part of the Fijian government's commitment to progressively realise gender equality for all its citizens, including by having a specific gender action plan for each sector and its ministry.

The 2020 Fiji Agriculture Census (Government of Fiji 2021) gathered valuable statistics on the details of men's and women's involvement in agriculture in the country, as well as the different access that men-headed and women-headed households currently have to economic resources and enabling services for agriculture. The Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Pacific Community 2019) shared the same sentiment regarding their valuable findings and recommendations on how Fiji can achieve greater gender equality in agriculture, including through government and community institutional change.

The policy lays out the principles by which agriculture-related ministries will be able to mainstream gender into all their programmes and activities, whether capital or development-related. The vision of the policy is to address the gender gap in agriculture in Fiji. This means that an inclusive future, for every Fijian farmer or person working in agriculture, whether a man or a woman, should have equitable access to the resources and services that he or she needs to be productive, resilient and food secure.

The policy is earmarked to institutionalise a gender mainstreaming strategy, thus realising better food and nutrition security, sustainable livelihoods, climate and disaster resilience, and successful commercial agriculture for women and men in Fiji within the policy period.

The policy has four long-term objectives agreed by a multi-stakeholder consultative mechanism that will work towards achieving the vision and goal:

1. Equality of access by women and men to the economic resources required for productive and resilient agriculture and markets.
2. Equality of access by women and men to the information, technology, and training needed for secure livelihoods and healthy diets.
3. Equality of representation and participation in decision-making by women and men, for Informed future agriculture planning and resourcing; and
4. Effective mainstreaming of gender perspectives in all programs through strengthened capacities, resources, and commitment in the agriculture ministries.

These objectives are further elaborated into 14 specific outcomes relating to equitable inclusion of women and men across a broad range of access, participation, decision making, and capacity development measures.

Comprehensive Country Gender Assessment

In 2023, the Government of Fiji published a comprehensive country gender assessment, being the first in the Pacific. The Fiji Country Gender Assessment 2023 (FCGA) reestablishes the Government's commitment in leaving no one behind while pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" along with the 2030 Agenda. The FCGA provides an overview of gender equality and women's empowerment in Fiji and identifies key challenges, gaps and opportunities for improvement in the space of gender and education, women's leadership and decision making, ending violence against all women and girls, gender and health, gender and economy, gender and environment; social and cultural norms. The assessment aims to inform policy decisions and programming to ensure the inclusion of all gender perspectives in national development.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

The BIEM Project aligns towards the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Government of Fiji indicates its commitment to address the issue of violence against women and girls through the Fiji National Action Plan (NAP) (Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection 2023). By introducing this plan, the government is showing a commitment to promoting gender equality, preventing violence and creating a safer and more inclusive society for all Fijians, both now and in the future.

The Fiji NAP actions CEDAW 2018 recommendation⁶ to adopt a national action plan for the prevention of gender-based violence (Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection 2023). The NAP recognises the urgent need to address the pervasive nature of gender-based violence through coordinated and comprehensive approach. By leveraging the country's experience and engaging various stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organisations and community members, the government can effectively implement strategies to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified 2017 by the Fiji Government. The convention aims to fulfill Fiji's commitment of promoting, protecting and ensuring the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity by adopting a comprehensive approach that encompasses legal, social, and cultural dimensions. By adopting a rights-based approach that recognises the inherent dignity and worth of individuals with disabilities, societies can work towards the full realisation of human rights for all. Promoting respect, removing barriers and fostering inclusivity can create a more equitable and inclusive society where the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their abilities, are upheld and protected (Government of Fiji 2016).

In 2024, the National Council for Persons with Disabilities in collaboration with the Fiji Disabled Peoples Federation held a consultation review of the National Disability Policy 2008 which involved critical stakeholders in drafting the Fiji National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2024–2033).

Rights of People of Diverse SOGIESC

The rights of people of diverse SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristic) are crucial for promoting inclusivity and respect for diversity within society. In the context of the Fiji Constitution (1997 and 2013), it is important to highlight that the protection of people of diverse SOGIESC rights may be explicitly stated under various provisions, even if there is no specific mention of SOGIESC rights as a standalone category. One such provision that may be relevant to the rights of individuals of diverse SOGIESC in the Fiji Constitution is the section on the right to equality and non-discrimination:

“Right to equality and freedom from discrimination 26 (1) Every person is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection, treatment and benefit of the law, 26 (3) A person must not be unfairly discriminated against, directly or indirectly on the grounds of his or her (a) actual or supposed personal characteristics or circumstances, including race, culture, ethnic or social origin, colour, place of origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, birth, primary language, economic or social or health status, disability, age, religion, conscience, marital status or pregnancy”.

This provision typically prohibits discrimination on various grounds, such as race, gender, religion and other status, which could encompass protection for individuals based on their sexual orientation, gender identity. While explicit inclusion of SOGIESC rights in the constitution is important for clarity and specificity, the broader guarantees of equality and non-discrimination can serve as a basis for protecting the rights of individuals of diverse SOGIESC within Fiji. It underscores the principle that all individuals, regardless of their SOGIESC, should be treated equally and without discrimination under the law. In advocating for the rights of people of diverse SOGIESC within Fiji, it may be beneficial to work towards explicit recognition and protection of these rights in the constitution or other relevant legislations which are familiar grounds for SOGIESC rights activist Rainbow Pride, Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality⁷ to name a few.

⁶ Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Fiji, 14 March 2019, CEDAW/C/FJI/CO/5

⁷ Diva for Equality. 2019. Unjust, Unequal, Unstoppable: Fiji Lesbians, Bisexual Women, Transmen and Gender Non Conforming People Tipping the Scales Toward Justice. Accessed from <https://divafiji.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DIVA-RESEARCH-REPORT-2019.pdf>, 14 February 2024.

5 Key risks and issues related to GSI, human rights and poverty alleviation

Consultations with communities in November 2023, identified several key risks and issues related to GSI, human rights and poverty allocation, as outlined below.

The excessive use of chemicals and pesticides in agriculture has led to water pollution in the Navua River.

The runoff from farms carries these harmful substances into the river, leading to a depletion of aquatic life and contamination of the water supply. Furthermore, the logging of mahogany in the upper catchment has contributed to soil erosion and sedimentation in the river, further degrading its ecosystem. The loss of vegetation and disturbance of the soil during logging activities increase the likelihood of landslides and sediment runoff during heavy rainfall.

Mining of river gravel and aggregates in the river gorge exacerbates the channel degradation, leading to increased sedimentation and reduced water flow. This not only affects the natural flow of the river, but also disrupts the habitat of aquatic species, resulting in a decrease in biodiversity. The combination of flooding, agricultural runoffs, logging and mining activities has led to a significant decline in the overall health of the river ecosystem. It is necessary to address these issues through sustainable agricultural practices, reforestation efforts, and regulating logging and mining activities to restore the balance of the catchment and protect the river ecosystem.

Improper waste management reduces the effectiveness of Marine Protected Areas along with coastal environments encompassing Navua catchment. The improper waste management practices such as open dumping (communal site) and inadequate treatment facilities can lead to the direct discharge of solid waste and faecal sludge (human and animal) into nearby marine and riparian habitats. This introduces harmful pollutants such as pathogens and excess nutrients which can inhibit effectiveness of Marine Protected Areas and communal established Freshwater Protected Areas. It is essential to address community-based marine and freshwater management practices that need the support of strengthened legislation.

Excess sediment load in streams and rivers impact bank stabilisation and sediment trapping for Navua River and its tributaries. The onset of sedimentation can affect trapping of sediments within the river system. Excessive sedimentation reduces the capacity of the river to trap and retain sediments will be compromised. Sediments will accumulate and settle on the riverbed, reducing depth and volume of the channel – essential for conveying water during periods of high tide or flooding. This results in the river being more prone to overflowing its banks and causing more frequent flood events, especially during intense rainfall periods.

Limited representation of vulnerable groups⁸ advocates within the Provincial Council system a key concern for future GSI, human rights and poverty alleviation programmes. The absence of key advocates in the district and provincial governance structure overseen by the Provincial Council raises concerns about the effectiveness of development programmes and the impacts of gender-based violence on marginalised groups. Without advocates pushing for policies and programmes that address gender-based violence and intentional inclusion of marginalised groups, there is a risk of perpetuating a culture of violence, discrimination and their voices and concerns overlooked or not adequately addressed.

Growing population impedes the capacity of village boundaries and the urgent need to extend boundaries beyond commercial and government designated leases. Increasing population increases demand for housing, resources and infrastructure. Existing village boundaries may not be able to cater to the expanding needs of the population, leading to overcrowding and strained resources. This can result in inadequate access to basic amenities such as water, sanitation, healthcare and education.

Ineffective legislation pertaining to freshwater and fisheries promote poachers to thrive in Beqa lagoon and Navua River. Fragile regulations and enforcement mechanisms create favourable conditions for poachers to operate without fear of significant consequences. Without a cohesive approach in place, a lack of coordination and collaboration among different government agencies responsible for the protection and management of the freshwater and fisheries will prevail, rendering the effectiveness of management plans and protected areas futile.

⁸ Women, youth, persons with disability and people of diverse SOGIESC.

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