

Rural Women Light up their Villages in Fiji

Women, girls, boys and men have different roles within their families and communities in Pacific Island Countries. Each of these groups is differently affected by, and has distinct ways of dealing with, the effects of climate change. Women's separate role in communities, however, means that they can play an important part in supporting their families and communities to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Women have valuable knowledge and skills which they can use when given the opportunity. UN Women is working with governments and partners to empower women through training as solar engineers.

Overcoming social barriers such as illiteracy and other language barriers; learning skills that are traditionally male dominated; venturing out of their comfort zones of rural village life overcoming the intimidation of flying out a country for the first time; 10 and grandmothers from remote rural communities around Fiji have successfully completed training to become solar engineers and have now returned and installed household solar panels for 376 homes in 12 villages around Fiji.

The participants were selected under the 'Rural Women Light up the Pacific' Programme between Barefoot College, UN Women, and Global Environmental Facility's Small Grants Programme and supported on the ground by the Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area Network. The programme selected women based on the criteria of being grandmothers, and either illiterate or semi-illiterate. The women are all from remote rural communities that do not have access to the national electricity grid. They are selected on these criteria because older women are some of the poorest members of their community; and they are the most likely to remain in their villages to continue to work as engineers, increasing the sustainability of programme outcomes. By showing what older and less educated women can achieve, the solar engineers provide an example to other women in beneficiary communities that they can aspire to do more than their traditional gender roles. The programme seeks to empower women to be agents of change in their communities, and use their skills to combat climate change.

Upon completion of a six month training course in India, the solar engineers returned to put their training into practice in their villages – establishing solar workshops and installing solar panels for each household. The women now remain in their communities and are available to provide maintenance and repairs. They have also trained others in the installation and maintenance of the panels. The household solar systems supply 40watts of power to each household, enough to light three bulbs, as well as providing enough power to charge mobile phones. Prior to the installation of the solar panels, the villages relied on diesel run generators, kerosene lamps and/or battery operated torches. The average cash income in Fijian villages is 1,500 Fijian Dollars per household per year, and the average cost of diesel is FJ\$3 per litre. Villages now have access to a cheap and sustainable energy source; they have light after sunset – which begins around 5:30pm in the cooler months.

The 10 engineers in Fiji have completed the installation for all households as of December 2013. The sustainability of the programme is based on the premise of village ownership. Each village contributed a building or shed to house the engineer's workshop and established a village solar committee to manage the sustainability of initiative. Each household in the villages pays an initial contribution into a fund which is managed by the committee, after this initial payment, they continue to pay a small monthly

contribution which goes towards panel maintenance and a small wage for the engineer. In villages where installation of the solar panels was completed earlier than December, 2013, the impacts have already been felt. “The kids are able to do a bit more of their school work at night”, said one of the Solar Committee Members from the Village of Dama, in Ra. In another village in Naoti, Kadavu, one of the men said that during fishing trips at night, they can clearly distinguish their village from out at sea. At another village in the Kadavu province, an engineer has already trained a young woman in her village to assist her in the maintenance. “On Saturday, I was busy with washing so I asked her (trained young women) to fix the charge controller in the communal hall and she fixed it and lit the light”, Reapi, the Solar Engineer said.

UN Women, together with Barefoot College, works closely with relevant national and local authorities on this initiative. The Barefoot College provides support to build self-sufficiency in a sustainable manner. The College promotes the ideology of ownership: for rural development activities to be successful and sustainable, they must be based in the village and managed and owned by beneficiaries. All Barefoot initiatives are planned and implemented by a network of rural women and men who are known as “Barefoot Professionals”.



Picture 1 – Solar Engineer Reapi from one of the remote villages in Kadavu, Fiji and her apprentice assembling the panels for the village community hall.



Picture 2 – Solar Engineer from Kadavu

**Please credit UN Women for the pictures*