

When the climate changes everything



Women's rights in Tuvalu

How climate change is reshaping women's lives in Tuvalu and undermining their rights

Let us introduce you to the reality of life for women in Tuvalu—a small island nation where the impacts of climate change are not distant threats, but daily challenges. Let us talk about women's rights in Tuvalu, and how they are being reshaped in 2025 by rising seas, changing weather patterns, and the erosion of the natural world that sustains our people and our culture.

Women in Tuvalu are central to family, food security, water security, caregiving, community cohesion, and the transmission of traditional knowledge and cultural practices. But climate change is placing a growing strain on their ability to live in dignity, to stay healthy, to earn a living, to access clean water, and to feel safe. This document tells their story. It is about the fundamental rights of Tuvaluan women—rights to health, food, water, land, work, housing, safety, and cultural identity—and how these are being compromised by climate change. It is also a story of resilience: of women leading responses, adapting practices, organizing their communities, and protecting what matters most. Their leadership must be recognized, their burdens shared, and their rights upheld.



▲ Women in Tuvalu are central to family life, food security, caregiving, community cohesion, and the transmission of traditional knowledge. *Photo credit: Tuvalu.tv*

Climate change: a threat to women's human rights in Tuvalu

This is Funafuti, our capital, covering just 2.4 square kilometres. You can see its beauty, but also its vulnerability. The image shows how our coastline has changed over the past decade—and where it may be in the next ten years. Scientists estimate that by 2050, sea levels here will rise by 16–34 centimetres under a very high emissions scenario (RCP 8.5). This could submerge nearly half of Funafuti's land during high tides, threatening homes, livelihoods, and our way of life.



▲ Funafuti from the air. *Photo credit: IUGS*

Rising sea levels and warming waters are damaging our marine environment. Coral bleaching, fish migration, and habitat loss are already affecting our food security. For a nation deeply connected to the ocean, this is a crisis.

Low-lying coral atoll Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like Tuvalu face a unique and deeply unjust reality: despite contributing the least to global greenhouse gas emissions, they are among the most severely affected by climate change. Rising sea levels, coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion, and increasingly severe weather events threaten their very existence—impacting homes, livelihoods, cultural identity, and access to basic services such as water and food.

These climate-related threats undermine the fundamental human rights of Tuvalu population, including the right to life, health, land, adequate housing, food, water, and cultural participation, as enshrined in international human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

For Tuvalu, the right to self-determination and sovereignty is also at stake as some nations face the real possibility of becoming uninhabitable. The international community has recognized the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as essential for the realization of all other rights. In this context, Tuvalu must be supported not only through urgent climate action and adaptation financing but also through recognition of its right to development, participation in decision-making, and access to remedy and justice for climate-related harms. Upholding these rights is not only a matter of legal obligation—it is a matter of global climate justice.

This is how the human rights of Tuvaluan women are being challenged by climate change.

Tuvaluan women's rights to healthy food and health

In Tuvalu, climate change is undermining women's rights to healthy food and health, as well as their ability to enjoy their cultural way of life. Women play a key role in inshore fishing and food gathering, which are not only vital for family nutrition but also deeply embedded in Tuvaluan cultural traditions.



▲ Women fishing in the Funafuti lagoon. *Photo credit: Puaseiese Andrienne Pedro*

As warming seas cause fish to migrate and coral reefs to bleach, food sources are dwindling, forcing families to rely on imported, processed foods that are expensive and less nutritious. This shift has contributed to rising rates of non-communicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension—conditions that disproportionately affect women. Under CEDAW Article 12 and ICESCR Articles 11 and 12, women have the right to adequate nutrition and the highest attainable standard of health, yet both are now at risk.



▲ Healthy coral reef. *Photo credit: Constructive Voice.*



► Bleached coral reef in Funafuti Atoll, affected by ocean acidification. *Photo credit: Guillermo Reverter Cid/Sea Shepherd*

Furthermore, as caregivers within families, women carry the growing burden of unpaid care work for sick loved ones, a responsibility recognized under CEDAW Article 5(b). The erosion of natural food systems and health exacerbates inequalities and threatens women's right to enjoy their cultural way of life, a right affirmed in CEDAW General Recommendation No. 34 and ICESCR Article 15(1)(a).



◀ Traditional healthy meal. *Photo credit: Tuvalu.tv*

Tuvaluan women's right to work and economic empowerment

In Tuvalu, women's right to work and economic empowerment—protected under CEDAW Article 11—is increasingly threatened by the impacts of climate change. Handicraft production, particularly weaving with pandanus leaves, is a major source of income for women, generating AUD 650,000 in cash income over a 12-month period, second only to fisheries at AUD 860,000.¹ In contrast, agriculture contributed just AUD 15,000, and remittances AUD 275,000, underscoring the critical economic role of handicrafts.



▲ Weaving with pandanus leaves is a major source of income for women in Tuvalu. *Photo credit: Tuvalu National Council of Women*

¹ Menaouer, Olivier II. Title III. Pacific Community IV. Tuvalu. Central Statistics Division

Yet this source of livelihood is now at risk as climate change damages pandanus trees through saltwater intrusion, coastal erosion, storms, and prolonged droughts. CEDAW General Recommendation 34 recognizes the value of women's informal and subsistence work in rural areas and calls for protection of these livelihoods. Moreover, the traditional knowledge and skills involved in pandanus weaving form an essential part of Tuvaluan culture, linking women's work to their cultural identity. This connection is acknowledged in CEDAW General Recommendation 21, which affirms culture as a resource for advancing women's rights. As climate pressures grow, safeguarding women's economic and cultural rights requires urgent adaptation strategies that both protect the environment and sustain traditional livelihoods.



▲ Use of pandanus leaves to produce handicraft. *Photo credit: Women for Change (Fatu Lei)*



▲ Coastal erosion, sea level rise and cyclones uproot pandanus trees. *Photo credit: Puaseiese Andrienne Pedro*

Tuvaluan women's right to safety and security of person

In Tuvalu, the loss of mangroves due to coastal erosion, stronger storms, and rising sea levels is putting women and girls at increased risk, undermining their right to safety and security of person, as protected under UDHR Article 3 and CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35, which highlights the link between gender-based violence and environmental factors.

Mangroves serve as natural defences that stabilize coastlines and protect communities from storm surges and cyclones. As these ecosystems vanish, the risk of flooding and land loss grows, threatening homes, infrastructure, and freshwater sources. For women and girls, this means greater exposure to unsafe and unstable living conditions, especially during and after extreme weather events. The erosion of this protective environment directly violates their right to adequate housing and protection from disasters, as affirmed by CEDAW Article 14(2)(h) and ICESCR Article 11.



▲ Healthy mangroves protect the coastline. *Photo credit: Puaseiese Andrienne Pedro*



▲ Residents clearing the main road in Funafuti, Tuvalu. *Photo credit: Wahasi Photography*



▲ King tide, Funafuti, Tuvalu, February 2024. *Photo credit: Wahasi Photography*



▲ Images from extreme weather events in Tuvalu. *Photos: Government of Tuvalu*

Tuvaluan women's right to adequate living conditions

In Tuvalu, internal migration from the outer islands to the capital, Funafuti, has increased significantly over the past decade, with 61% of the population now residing in Funafuti, up from 57% in 2012. This movement, driven by the search for better services, employment, and living conditions, has led to severe overcrowding in homes and strained public infrastructure. For women, this situation undermines their right to adequate living conditions, as guaranteed under CEDAW Article 14(2)(h), ICESCR Article 11, and UDHR Article 25. Women in Funafuti frequently raise concerns about overcrowded homes, which not only stretch household resources but also heighten stress and interpersonal conflict.

The dense living conditions also negatively affect women's right to health and mental well-being, protected under ICESCR Article 12 and reaffirmed in CEDAW General Recommendation No. 24, which recognizes mental health as an integral part of women's health rights. In these overcrowded environments, privacy is limited, domestic responsibilities increase, and tensions rise—especially for women who often manage caregiving and household roles.



▲ Sea level rise is not a distant threat for Tuvalu—it is a reality people are living with today.
Photo credit: Puaseiese Andrienne Pedro

Tuvaluan women's rights to water and sanitation

Tuvalu's chronic water scarcity, exacerbated by climate change and geographic limitations, directly threatens women's right to water and sanitation, a right recognized by CEDAW General Recommendation No. 34 (para 80), ICESCR Articles 11 and 12, and UN Resolution A/RES/64/292, which affirms access to water as a fundamental human right. In Funafuti, where there are no underground freshwater sources, communities rely almost entirely on rainwater for drinking, hygiene, and cooking. During the 2022 drought, which lasted nine months and prompted a State of Public Emergency, water reserves were severely depleted, requiring international aid to support affected communities.

Funafuti's water crisis had dire consequences, particularly for women, who bore the burden of managing scarce water supplies for household needs. With limited access to clean water, women had to ration water for cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, the elderly, and sick family members. Hygiene standards declined, increasing the risk of skin infections and other water-related illnesses.

Beyond the physical impact, the water crisis placed immense mental stress and exhaustion on women, who had to find ways to cope with daily life under extreme scarcity. This also added to their already heavy burden of unpaid care work, violating their right to be free from excessive unpaid care responsibilities, as recognized under CEDAW Article 5(b) and further emphasized in CEDAW General Recommendations 29 and 34, which highlight the unequal impact of care roles on women during crises.



▲ During the 2022 droughts, households were entitled to six buckets of water per household per day. *Photo credit: Tuvalu Red Cross Society*

Tuvaluan women at the forefront of climate action

While Tuvaluan women are among those most affected by climate change, they are also leading the way in resilience and adaptation. Across the country, women are leading practical, community-based responses to the environmental challenges that threaten their lives, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. From recycling greywater for daily use and promoting water-saving practices to planting corals and trees that protect the shoreline, women are putting local knowledge into action to safeguard their environment. They cultivate home gardens to enhance food security, use recycled materials to preserve traditional handicraft practices, and engage actively in awareness-raising and education for children and youth.

In times of crisis, they act—managing household needs, caring for vulnerable family members, and maintaining social cohesion within their communities. These contributions are critical to national resilience and should be fully recognized and supported in climate policy and planning.



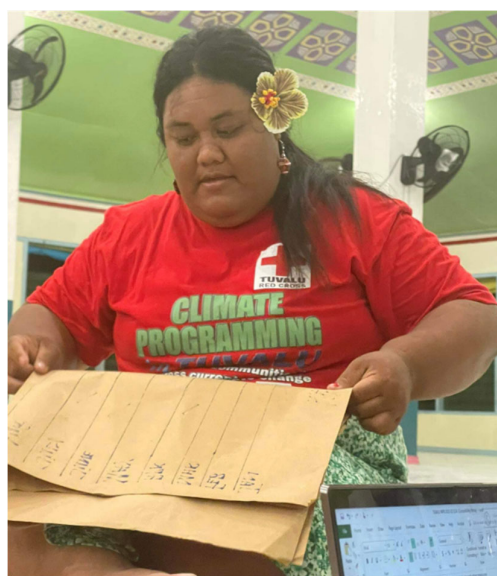
▲ Tuvaluan women are leading the country's global advocacy on climate change. *Photo credit: Tuvalu.tv*

The economic losses from declining marine resources, damage to pandanus trees, and the reduction in handicraft income, the mental and physical strain from water crises and food insecurity, and the erosion of cultural traditions and caregiving roles—these are all forms of loss and damage that disproportionately affect women. As the global climate financing architecture continues to evolve, it is essential that loss and damage mechanisms include and respond to the gendered dimensions of climate impacts. Women's losses are not only economic but also social, emotional, and cultural. These must be made visible and addressed through fair, inclusive, and accessible support.

We also need to highlight the remarkable contribution of Tuvaluan women in leading the country's global advocacy on climate change, particularly through their representation at some of the highest levels of international legal proceedings. Tuvalu has taken a bold step on the international legal stage by actively engaging with both the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) to seek justice and accountability for the impacts of climate change. As a low-lying atoll nation facing rising seas, Tuvalu supported the global initiative for an ICJ advisory opinion to clarify the legal obligations of states to protect the rights of present and future generations from the harmful effects of climate change.

Simultaneously, through the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law (COSIS), Tuvalu co-requested an advisory opinion from ITLOS on states' duties under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to prevent and reduce greenhouse gas emissions that harm the marine environment. These actions reflect Tuvalu's determined use of international law to affirm its right to exist, safeguard its people's future, and demand stronger global accountability for climate action—efforts in which Tuvaluan women have played a powerful and visible role.





▲ Photo credits, clockwise from bottom left: Fusi Alofa, Tuvalu Family Health Association, Tuvalu.tv, Live and Learn Tuvalu, Tuvalu Red Cross Society, UNDP.

◀ Photo credits (previous page): Tuvalu.tv

This is our story

This is the story of Tuvaluan women living on the frontlines of climate change. It is a story of strength and care—of women finding ways to feed their families when fish no longer come close to shore, of managing household needs when the rain doesn't fall, of holding communities together in the face of rising seas and deep uncertainty. It is also a story of rights being slowly stripped away—not by choice or failure, but by forces beyond our control.

And yet, these same women continue to lead. They grow gardens, plant mangroves, weave traditional knowledge into new solutions, and raise their voices for a future where they—and their daughters—can thrive. Their contributions are essential, but their losses are too often invisible. We need the world to see them, to stand with them, and to invest in their leadership, their wellbeing, and their right to live safely and with dignity in the land and culture they call home.

This is the story we must tell today. But we hope that in the near future, we will be able to tell you a different one—a story of resilience rewarded, of prosperity built on justice, and of women living in safety, with their rights not only protected, but fully realized.



▲ This is our story – the story of Tuvaluan women living on the frontlines of climate change.
Photo credit: Tuvalu.tv

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