

Ethical issues arising in research into health and climate change

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Pecha Kucha presentation

Ethical issues with “the changing role of women in the agriculture sector and their contribution to climate change adaptation – a case study of Sigatoka and Ba, Fiji.”

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Brief description of context

Sigatoka and Ba are the two most agriculturally productive regions in Fiji, and contribute heavily to Fiji’s GDP. In recent years, due to climate change, agricultural output and quality in these towns has begun to diminish. According to my research, local women who work in the agricultural sector are more impacted by climate change than men. During times of sudden weather changes such as drought, heavy rainfall and/or tropical cyclones, agricultural productivity is insufficient to feed families, let alone for commercial purposes, leaving women dependent on canned food for survival that is “unhealthy” (R4) (especially for children), causing frequent sickness and weakness. My research focuses on how women are trying to adapt to the ongoing impact of climate change on health, environment and nutrition. It also seeks to identify what assistance they require and what can be provided.

Fiji’s agricultural industry is vulnerable and continues to be negatively impacted by climate change and it is necessary to start taking adaptation actions. With the portion of climate finance dedicated towards agriculture industry in Fiji, it is essential that the development of climate agricultural and health policies recognize the important contribution women have made, and initiate funding assistance where needed.

Aims

The aim of this research was to recognize women’s contribution to the agricultural sector in the two regions in Fiji, and how the women are trying to adapt to the changing climate. In addition, this research aims to contribute towards decision-making processes for relevant stakeholders locally and regionally.

Objectives

The evolving position of women in farm production is expected to be most obvious in Fiji’s subsistence and commercial cultivation. The objective of this research was to:

- 1) Identify the risks and impacts of climate change on the agriculture sector in the Sigatoka and Ba regions in Fiji;
- 2) Identify adaptation approaches to enhance agricultural production in Sigatoka and Ba.

Brief description of the research

As a traditional patriarchal society, Fiji has multiple barriers that limit women farmers’ access to better farming conditions, including proper attire (clothes and shoes), proper hand tools, and access to land ownership. In addition, basic home chores (including taking care of the elderly and children and refilling and carrying water from nearby rivers and streams) consume significant amount of women’s time and

energy. These have affected the health of women farmers (including frequent infection and sickness, poor hygiene practices, excruciating body aches, and injuries). In addition, women struggle to access timely and proper health care due to their distance from the health care facilities. Fiji is a developing island country with moderate growth, hence the assistance and facilities provided to villages impacted by climate change is modest, and for some, non-existent.

This research seeks to improve communication between local communities and relevant stakeholders to ensure timely effective responses to climate crisis and addressing the deteriorating health issues.

Description of ethical issues

1. Respect for participants

Female participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and sense of dignity were respected throughout the research phase. This was achieved by seeking all the participants verbal approval prior to commencing the research, and they were informed that participation was voluntary and they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the research at any time. All the information was anonymised and kept confidential to ensure no harm or exploitation of the participants. The study method was cooperative and empowered participants' engagements.

2. Cultural sensitivity

The customs and cultural norms of the participants were considered. A humble cultural approach was taken when conducting the research. The local (I-Taukei) communities are conservative in their culture, hence all approaches towards local women were conducted in a respectful, soft-spoken manner, not interrupting while they talked. An I-Taukei female translator was appointed to convey the messages relayed in local language. A *sevusevu* (yaqona ceremony) was performed at all the study sites in both regions – a compulsory act to seek permission prior to entering the village for any purposes by an outsider. In this ceremony, the visitors presented a bundle of kava (*Piper methysticum* – a traditional drink) to the village *turaga-ni-koro* (chief) and thanked him and his forefathers for the land that they are seated upon. Following, requests were made and permission was taken for the research to be conducted in the village.

3. Informed dissemination and collaborative approach

While conducting the research, it was ensured that the local environment and ecosystem is not affected in a negative way – not causing any destruction or harm by the research conducted to the natural setting of the communities. Instead, with my research and advocacy, I aimed to highlight the importance of the environment to the participants. In addition, the research findings were disseminated responsibly and data obtained was without exaggeration. The research process included involvement of the local communities and participants to ensure that research is courteous, pertinent, and helpful to the community's concerns.

4. Written consent for research

To avoid any unforeseen circumstances, a formal "Human Research Ethics" (HRE) application form was filled and submitted to the university's Research Office for approval to conduct the research. The form ensured the validity and transparency of the research. In addition, a written set of questionnaires was attached to the HRE application so that the university was aware of the questions addressed to the participants. This was to avoid any power imbalances and biasness between the researcher and the participants.

5. Males intervention while interview

While conducting the interview with the females, the male(s) of the house was present at all times and the female farmers were unable to openly talk or respond to the interview questions. In addition, the males interrupted with personal comments while the women were talking. To overcome this challenge,

the translator and I took walks with the female farmers to their farmlands and asked them to answer or comment on questions that they may have wanted to answer differently.

6. Choice of translator

Given the conservative nature of the village, it would have been inappropriate to have assistance from a male translator while interviewing female respondents. This would have created an environment of disrespect and to some extent, jealousy and anger as the females would have shared their experiences with a man. To avoid this circumstance at all costs, a female translator was employed to assist the researcher.

7. Selection of participants

Even though the method of this research included random sampling, the researcher was unable to fully comply with this. In every village the researcher visited, the *turaga-ni-koro* (village chiefs) selected the women farmers for the interview session. The challenge was that the researcher had to adhere to it, rather than randomly selecting the women themselves.

8. Potential harm

Engaging in discussions on climate change may induce worry or unease, particularly for some female farmers who have had substantial difficulties owing to environmental alterations. The researcher addressed delicate questions with caution and empathy, permitting participants to decline questions that were overly personal or unpleasant. The researcher highlighted sources of information for assistance if required.

Conclusion

There will be winners and losers as a result of climate change, at least in the short term. Certain regions may benefit from increases in agricultural output while others may encounter hurdles. While the female farmers of the Ba and Sigatoka regions encounter health and social issues towards adaptation strategies in agriculture to combat the impact of climate change, new institutional and local approaches must be identified and developed, bringing together important stakeholders to address the needs of rural women to enhance efficiency via greater utilization of resources and services. In addition, easier access to healthcare facilities for locals and gender roles education for men is really important for the goodwill of the community.

Recommendations

1. To have accountability and transparency in the allocation of climate finance for adaptation strategies to climate change impacts on health, economy and the environment. This will enable faster and more efficient adaptation approaches as funds will be put to use in right place.
2. To have provision for women empowerment and gender roles in climate change for both men and women.

References

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