



ENVIRONMENT SPECIAL



From the People of Japan

GENDERED VOICES

*Impacted Livelihoods:
Women in Oil Spill
Affected Areas*

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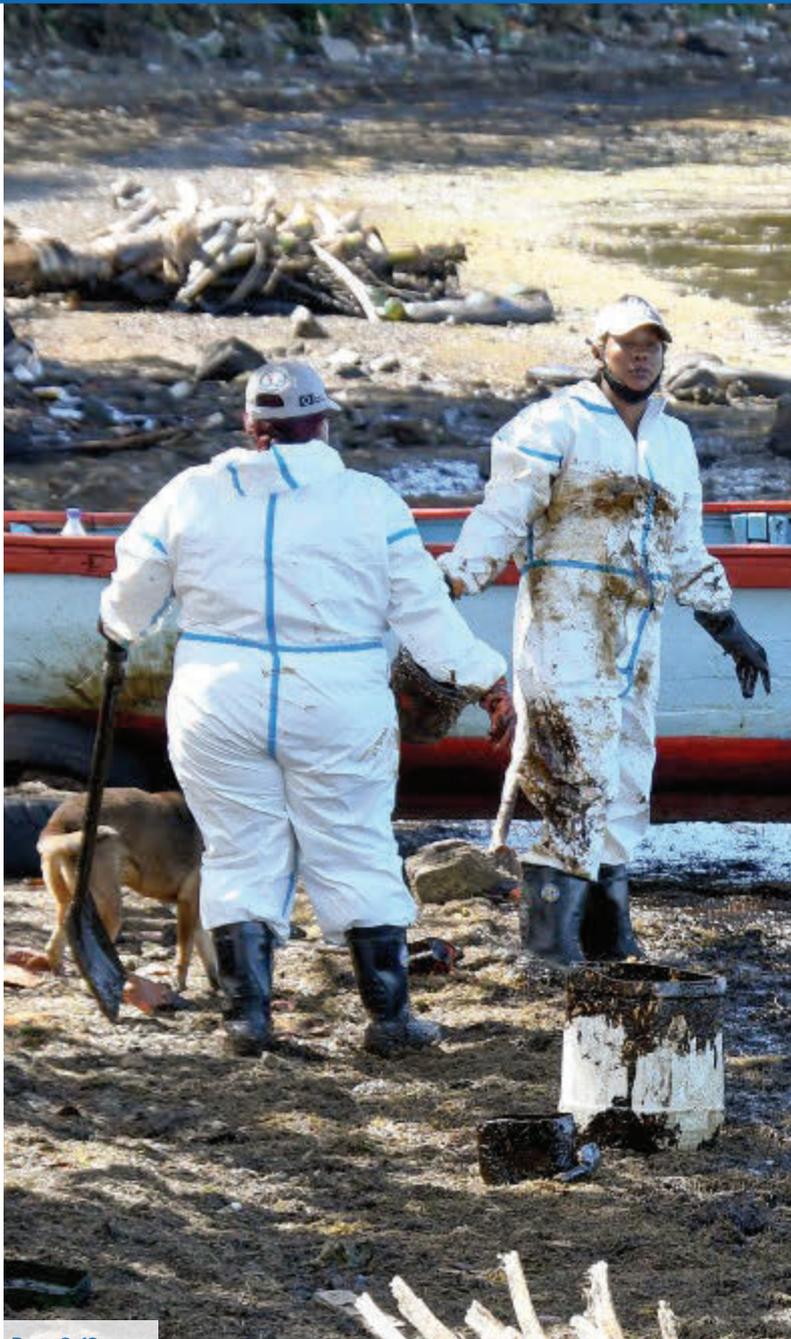
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IMPACTED LIVELIHOODS: WOMEN IN OIL SPILL AFFECTED AREAS

INTRODUCTION

On 26 July 2020, the Wakashio bulk carrier ran aground on a reef just off the South Eastern coast of Mauritius. Days later, the vessel spilled over 1000 tons of fuel into the waters of Pointe d’Esny affecting sites known for their touristic potential and protected ecosystems hosting rare endemic species. Beyond the ecological disaster, the Wakashio oil spill is taking a heavy toll on the livelihoods of around 48,000 Mauritians, across 17 impacted coastal villages. Happening in a difficult post-Covid-19 context, this crisis has contributed to further disrupt the economic activities of the South Eastern Coast where maritime activities have been restricted for months.

This edition of Gendered Voices aims to share the stories from the communities living in the villages impacted by the oil spill. Focused on women’s lives, the newsletter highlights the oil spill impact on the livelihoods of those working in marine-based activities or tourism, and whose lives have been affected by the disaster. Insights into the lived experiences of four courageous women, whom we interviewed in December 2020, reveal the complexity of their struggles, share their coping strategies, and illustrate the ways in which they are building resilience. The newsletter also highlights the forms of governmental and non-governmental outreach support from which these women are benefiting; or lacking to inform possible options to address specific immediate needs and long-term planning.



Message from ... Mrs. Moheenee Nathoo, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Solid Waste Management and Climate Change



Date: 29 March 2021

I am pleased to contribute to this edition of the UNDP Gendered Voices Newsletter about the Wakashio Oil Spill.

At the very outset, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the UNDP and acknowledge the excellent collaboration and sustained support provided to the Ministry of Environment, Solid Waste Management and Climate Change to meet its National and International commitments.

2020 has been a particularly challenging year for Mauritius because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the oil spill that followed the grounding of MV Wakashio. This issue of the Gendered Voices Newsletter brings to light the challenges

that women of the South-East coast faced during the crisis, and highlights the versatility and determination of women in general when it comes to fighting for a cause.

During the emergency phase, Mauritian authorities received significant help from the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office. This helped to mobilise extensive resources and obtain the support of experts from UN agencies (International Maritime Organisation and the United Nations Development Programme), United Kingdom and Japan, and local experts. As a reliable development partner of Mauritius, the UNDP provided technical advice on response and stakeholders' involvement, and also helped to devise a strategy for the long-term monitoring of the socio-economic and environmental impact of the oil spill.

Immediately after the crisis was declared, Help Desks organised by the Government and partners, were set up to provide affected people with help, information and guidance with regard to the prejudice caused by the MV Wakashio incident. It is also worth mentioning that actions are being carried out by experts to rehabilitate and restore the flora, fauna, and coastline in the short, medium and long terms.

Furthermore, an environmental, social and economic impact assessment of the oil spill will soon be undertaken. The Government has also set up various schemes to support the economic operators of the region including fishers, skippers and taxi drivers during that difficult time.

Women of the South-East coast of Mauritius have demonstrated that, in times of crisis, the country could depend upon them. Along with men, they have participated in the cleaning operations that were undertaken in many coastal villages. They patiently cleaned the soiled mangroves, collected debris and joined in all the activities under the guidance of experts.

I wish once again to express my gratitude to our development partners, friendly countries and NGOs for their quick response following the oil spill. With the completion of the dismantling of the MV Wakashio in the coming weeks, we look forward to continue this fruitful partnership towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Mrs. Moheenee Nathoo

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COPING WITH AN ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER IN THE AFTERMATH OF COVID-19

Renowned for its quaint villages and natural beauty, the South-East of Mauritius offers extensive job opportunities to its inhabitants, many of whom are women who work as fishers, divers, boat skippers and beach hawkers selling fruits, handicrafts and artisanal products. From the onset of the disaster, which affected several villages, women in the region have contributed to containment including the oil removal by shoveling, the placement of oil-absorbent booms, and the distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), among other activities. Demonstrating impressive knowhow on the marine ecosystem, these women have also provided innovative local solutions to mitigate the crisis. However, since marine activities have been restricted in the waters of the South-East coast, many of these women were rendered jobless overnight, and were forced to face uncertainties over an extended period..

In response to the oil spill crisis, the Government of Mauritius has set up measures to mitigate the oil spill impact and established a dedicated MV Wakashio Support Cell to reach out to the affected communities. Registered fishermen and boat operators, amongst others, are currently allocated Rs 10,200 for subsistence during the time of banned activities at sea.¹ On 11 December 2020, the Government announced a supplementary aid plan of Rs 38,7 million to be allocated to the afflicted South-East residents and enterprises.² In addition, restoration operations commenced with financial and technical assistance from the Government of Japan and a Japanese Disaster Relief Expert Team.

On 11 August 2020³ the UN system deployed an interagency emergency mission with UN team of experts on oil spill response, legal support and coordination; and launched a UN Recovery Fund of USD 2.5 million⁴. In collaboration with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), UNDP Mauritius supported a Socio-Economic and Environmental Impact Rapid Assessment team for data collection on economy and employment; health and stress management; social impacts and key community concerns to help inform proposals on support providing immediate and long-term assistance to the affected communities.

At the grassroots level, UNDP Mauritius also launched the ‘Stronger Together’ campaign, in parallel with the ‘Restoration of the Environment and Employment for Fishers of the South-East Coast of Mauritius’ campaign. Through this assistance, UNDP Mauritius aims to support the restoration of the environmental and ecological systems damaged by the oil spill and raise funds for targeted initiatives to facilitate, train and equip fishers to practice off-lagoon fishing, away from the oil-affected areas. In line with UNDP’s objective to support mainstreaming biodiversity, the campaigns seek to ‘build back better’ by reshaping sustainable coastal livelihoods in the affected areas in a holistic manner. This entails (i) assisting communities to adopt sustainable and resilient economic activities at sea; (ii) engaging local labour to assess coral status and monitor marine activities; and (iii) support the gradual replenishment of fish stocks in the lagoon and overall marine ecosystem restoration.



WAITING TO HEAD BACK OUT TO SEA: MAUREEN'S STORY

Known as a resourceful and independent woman in Cité la Chaux, on the South-East coast of Mauritius, 50-year-old Maureen has been working as a fisher since her adolescence. By age 12, she was already nurturing an immense passion for the ocean; and, by age 16, she would head out to the deep waters with her father to fish and earn a living. Later, Maureen joined one of her brothers and would alternate between fishing, when weather conditions were favourable; and, working as builders, another livelihood that she sustained for decades until the adverse impacts of the Wakashio oil spill.

“ I have 6 brothers and 5 sisters. My brothers are true fishers and they taught me everything they know about the ocean and the art of fishing even though I was a young girl. They imparted vital knowledge on waves, currents, weather conditions and wind direction, all of which are indispensable to maximize fishing outcomes and to be safe at sea. This knowledge has even enabled me to save a fisherman from drowning after his boat had capsized in the deep sea.

As a passionate fisher, I practice artisanal fishing, mostly angling, and I dive in the reef vicinity to catch hermit crabs which I use as bait. I catch fish like 'Viel', 'Berj', 'Carandine' and occasionally octopuses. Back in the day, my dad and I used to catch scores of 'Poisson

Corne; but today this fish and many other species have become scarce due to overfishing and marine ecosystem degradation.”

Since the Wakashio oil spill, Maureen’s livelihood has been greatly affected, with ordeals ensuing one after the other. Like many fishers and residents of the South-East region, she instinctively volunteered to help contain the devastating oil spill.

“ In the aftermath of the oil spill, I volunteered to place and remove the oil-absorbent booms meant to contain the spread. One time, as I was getting back on the boat after placing a boom in the water, I slipped on the oily rim of the pirogue, hit my mouth against the wood and broke my front tooth. After this bad luck, I had to spend a significant sum of money to replace the broken tooth.

The worst was yet to come... Like many others who depend on marine activities to survive, I am now basically jobless, and I struggle to earn a living. I had hoped to receive some financial aid in exchange for my volunteering time and efforts to contain the oil spill.

However, because I do not have a Fishermen Registration Card, I am not eligible to receive the Rs 10,200 allowance. It is a difficult situation. My sisters support me financially for now and I receive Rs 1900 per month as social aid following a surgery I had recently. That said, I wish that the Government would extend their support to non-registered fishers like me. We have limited to no support in general. In times of disasters like Wakashio, we could benefit from help.

Today, I feel utterly frustrated as I have no access to the sea and no income. I spend much time thinking about my fate. It is mentally and physically exhausting. I only have one wish... to head back out to sea and fish again. At least, in doing so, one is guaranteed some form of revenue or a meal for the day!

My dream is to be able to afford a small boat and to become an independent fisher. Currently, I must depend upon others. For now, I am waiting to recover from the surgery. As long as the decision to reallocate economic activities at sea remains uncertain, the only way for me to earn some money is to work at the construction sites.”





RELAUNCHING HER SCUBA DIVING CENTRE: DAVEENA'S DREAM

After 13 years in the hospitality industry, 33-year-old Daveena had long dreamed of opening a scuba diving centre with her husband on the South Eastern coast of Mauritius, where they live with their two children. After months of procedures and investments, she finally obtained the license to operate her business in early March 2020, shortly before the country went into lockdown due to COVID-19. When the lockdown was lifted in June 2020, Daveena was ready to kick-start her scuba-diving centre, but weeks later the disastrous oil spillage caused by Wakashio led to the closure of beaches and marine activities throughout the affected South-East coast.

“For ten years, my husband and I have shared a strong passion for the underwater world. The marvelous creatures, the authentic sensation, the peace ... it is a real meditation when I scuba dive. Finally, we resolved to set up our own business as a way of living our passion for the ocean and earning a living at the same time. Our business launch was sadly short-lived due to the lockdown. We tried to survive for months on the Rs 5,100 Government's Self-Employed Assistance Scheme. After the lockdown, we

sought creative ways to relaunch the diving center, and entice Mauritian clientele to come and discover the rich marine world with us and learn about its sensitive ecosystem. But we had not anticipated an ecological disaster like Wakashio!

As soon as the incident happened in late July, we received a communiqué from the Mauritius Scuba Diving Association informing us of the oil slick. The next morning, I was on the waterfront. The wave of sadness that engulfed those present was overwhelming. We were shocked beyond belief. People around me had no clue how to express their emotions. But there was no time to waste. Blessed with some communication skills, I swiftly took the initiative to coordinate actions using a loudspeaker, something that became my daily routine from the onset of the oil spill and for the next four weeks that followed ... day and night.”

Even after access to the Waterfront was restricted, Daveena and her team were still determined to reinstate the Waterfront to its original state.

“One thing that marked me was the incredible woman power that emanated from the chain of solidarity on the Waterfront and other affected spots. Women were taking the lead in specific domains or multi-tasking. It was as if women were intrinsically ecological disaster managers. They were controlling stocks of donation, dispatching equipment and food. They were also heading out on boats to place and remove oil absorbent booms. Women were stunningly organised in this unprecedented crisis!

The Wakashio incident is still affecting us residents of the South-East, especially those currently earning no income from any marine activities. The situation has exacerbated my



financial struggles, already toppled over by the lockdown. My livelihood and that of my family have been disrupted. I am grateful that the rent for the scuba diving centre has been suspended for now. However, my personal loan payments will resume in December at the expiry of the moratorium. As the Rs 10,200 Governmental aid does not suffice, I am seeking alternative jobs to cope financially. I am also unsure of when we will be able to resume our diving activities.”

Considering the scale of the oil spill crisis and its cross-cutting socioeconomical impacts, Daveena calls upon the Government to prolong the Wakashio Solidarity Fund. According to her, activities at sea will take time to kick off again; trust will take time to be rebuilt, and much apprehension on the quality of the sea water will linger.

“Women are mentally strong. We do not give up easily. Many women in the South-East have been affected by the pandemic and the Wakashio incident, but they are prepared to adapt their livelihoods to survive. That said, for someone who has worked at sea for several decades, reinventing oneself can be a brutal task. Those who have to change livelihoods will suffer, but hopefully adapt.



BUILDING BACK BETTER: GISÈLE'S HOPE

53-year-old Gisèle lives with her family in Pointe Jérôme, Mahebourg. Divorced and mother of two grown sons, she shared that her household had been sustained by various sources of income, until the Wakashio hit the South Eastern reef and brought about restrictions on activities at sea. Subsequently, many hardships have befallen Gisèle, leading her to the brink of mental and physical exhaustion.

“One of my sons is a diving instructor and the other one works at a local lodge. Professionally, both were impacted by COVID-19 due to restricted international tourism. However, following the oil spill, my son, the diving instructor, lost his job. Presently, I must support both of them financially by increasing my own workload. Between my job as a security guard

at night and as a bar tender during the daytime, I sometimes skip sleep for 48 hours in a row. The extra money allows me to pay the monthly bills, including my debts, those of my sons and to buy food. I can feel that fatigue is catching up on me and I am dubious about my endurance during this hardship.

The night that I discovered the horror of the Wakashio incident still plays vividly in my memory. I was returning home after work when my brother, a professional fisherman with unequivocal knowledge of the South-East waters, rushed me to the beach after he had heard of the news. As ‘zenfan lamer’ (children of the ocean), we were extremely shocked, worried, angry ... We had to see it with our eyes to evaluate the danger that was looming over our costal livelihoods and over our ecosystem which had already been impacted by climate change.

When oil began pouring into the sea, I joined many others in Mahebourg to try and rid the water of the thick fuel with whatever equipment I had at hand ... tin, shovel, bucket ... Most recently, I joined a Polyeco team in Rivière des Créoles and Ti Bel Air where mangroves are still soaked in fuel oil. In the cleaning process, notwithstanding wearing gloves, the danger is imminent as, besides removing oil, we also pick up syringes, broken bottles, bicycle parts, sharp pieces of metal and all kinds of rubbish that people have been dumping in the lagoons for a long time.’

According to Gisèle, the most daunting concern for many South-East residents today is the alleged cancer threat of the oil spillage. At first, no one seemed to worry and some even dived into the fuel oil to conduct underwater inspections. However, after dead dolphins and other lifeless



marine species were found on the South-East coast weeks after the oil spill, fear started brewing amongst the locals about the toxicity level of the seawater.

I can only rely on a security-related job here and there. It is a risky job, but I am a strong woman. This kind of job entails putting myself in danger to make others feel safe.

“ When I was not working every consecutive night as security guard, I would go for nocturnal fishing with my family and catch sharks, other fish and calamari to sell and earn some money. Now this profitable activity is prohibited due to the Wakashio incident. There is no certainty that our fish are safe for consumption. Despite several job opportunities as security guard, bouncer and bar tender, I am struggling financially. I could have asked for help from my brothers, but they are even worse off than me as they do not hold the official Fishermen Registration card to access outreach aid. Financially,

The Wakashio incident is a disaster.⁵ It will further damage our marine ecosystem, which has already been declining for decades. However, this oil crisis offers a golden opportunity to build back better! The government should launch a lagoon restoration programme and hand out jobs to as many residents of the South-East as possible, including women workers who have been impacted by Wakashio.

We must rehabilitate our marine ecosystem to allow the rich aquatic biodiversity to be restored, and we, humans, have a substantial role to play in this process!”



HELPING THOSE IN NEED: VIRGINIE'S WILL

With 20 years of experience as a professional boat skipper, 37-year-old Virginie was the first woman in Mauritius to obtain an official skipper license in 2005. Born and raised in Pointe d'Esny in a family of fishermen, boaters and skippers, today she lives in Grand Bel Air, an area which has not been spared by the calamitous impact of the oil slick. Against wind and tide, as a little girl, Virginie would accompany her father on his fishing boat to explore the marine world.

“ My family has not only taught me about fishing and maneuvering a boat at sea, but also about eco-consciousness and ethics regarding the marine life. My father always advised us not to consume ‘Bénitiers’, for instance, as they are on the verge of extinction. Today, as a firsthand witness of the decline of our marine ecosystems, I seize the opportunity that my job offers to educate my clients on the protection of the marine biodiversity. This is why I prefer my educational glass-bottom boat trips where I can visually demonstrate the bleached corals and the underwater world to people, to the fun party cruises that I also propose to my clients.

Today I'm am fully integrated in the skipper community, which is largely male dominated. The biggest hurdle I faced in the beginning was the rejection by the Mauritian public, mostly women, because of my gender. Some would refuse to go boating if I was the one steering. My dad or male cousin would then have had to accompany me on tours. Following the advice of some female acquaintances, I toughened up to regain ownership of my profession and I would not let anyone call me out on my own boat. Today, I am a widely appreciated skipper both amongst Mauritians and the foreign clientele. Women can do anything!"

According to Virginie, on the one hand, COVID-19 has caused tremendous economic havoc and disrupted coastal livelihoods; and on the other, the Wakashio crisis has brought a vast majority of South-East inhabitants to their knees.

“ *When I heard of the oil spill, I instantaneously posted an emergency call on my Facebook page 'Totof Tours' to gather my skipper friends to come up with a strategy to rescue our lagoons from the black tide. Thereafter, I embraced multiple roles; from heading out on boats to place and remove oil absorbent booms; coordinating food donations, materials, PPE equipment at the Mahebourg Waterfront focal point; to allocating affected sites to volunteers for cleaning processes. It was unprecedented, spectacular, moving! People would respond to my logistics query within minutes. Every single person felt concerned ... from the mass of volunteers coming from all walks of life, tour operators, taxi drivers, you name it.*

Like many who volunteered 7/7, I had severe throat issues in the first few weeks following the Wakashio incident. Today I still suffer from burnt skin and rashes, all linked to the oil spillage. The most frustrating is the fact that our future as ocean-dependent individuals remains unclear. We were not informed of the recent reopening of the sea, and now we must spend a colossal amount of money to restore our boats and engines which have remained dormant for months. We cannot just take people out on boat trips to encounter breakdowns while at sea. And it is still unclear how the dismantlement of the second piece of the Wakashio will be done. Lest there is another oil spill, we worry that beach access restrictions will be reinstated, and all efforts invested in relaunching our business will be useless. It is mentally strenuous!"

Concerning a coordinated post-COVID-Wakashio scheme, Virginie calls upon the Government to reinforce financial support for the South-East locals who gained no income for multiple months, even preceding the Wakashio incident.

“ *To cope mentally and physically, in August I set up a small team to help 250 families who had been left without any financial safety net or external support since the Wakashio oil spill. Other teams such as 'Sud Espoir' and 'Zenes sans Frontiers' are likewise reaching out to other cohorts of poor families. While we all await new developments on the Wakashio situation, I continue to help the helpless as a way of escaping the distressing reality that me and my fellow ocean people continue to endure."*

CONCLUSION

The newsletter provides both stories of resilience and hope; as well as the challenges brought about by the dual shocks of COVID-19 and the Wakashio Oil Spill.

It brings to light distinct aspects of women empowerment such as (i) women breaking into traditional male-dominated jobs such as fishing, boat skipper, security guard, bouncer and scuba diving; (ii) women as having a wealth of local knowledge and skills; (iii) women ready to alter livelihoods to acquire and reinforce their economic security and that of their family; (iv) and women intuitively and effectively taking leadership positions in times of a natural disaster to help contain the scale of the crisis. In light of the evidence provided, it is hoped that (i) targeted policies and programmes be developed and implemented to ensure support and long-term benefits for women and local inhabitants of the affected South-East areas, as well as (ii) the constitution of natural disaster management programmes be inclusive, whereby women can participate, engage, learn and share their knowledge and experience.

It also illustrates the intersectional evidence of the challenges faced by communities living in the South-East region of Mauritius following the MV Wakashio oil spill, which compounded the adverse impacts of COVID-19 and stringent lockdown measures.

As informed by the four women featured in the newsletter, many jobs in the affected areas have been brought to a halt after the oil slick and subsequent official restrictions of access to the sea. Their stories highlight how the livelihoods of local inhabitants have been impacted by the ecological disaster in complex ways. Their challenges range from unemployment, health concerns, truncated business ventures and, to some extent, a reinforcement of gendered roles that place a heavier burden on their obligations to provide support in the most difficult of situations.

Other challenges shared by Maureen and Virginie include injury and health problems experienced while volunteering. The women have also highlighted the constraints faced by non-registered fishers and unregistered boaters or skippers, who in times of crises have limited to no access to official forms of support. Furthermore, the women also shared the psychosocial stress they are enduring due to the oil spill, which is taking a hefty toll on the mental health of the inhabitants.







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