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## **Pathways to political participation in Fiji: gender, race and religion in sustainable community development and nation building**

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### **Introduction**

This article is based on my involvement in the work of two women's groups operating at grassroots level to create common pathways towards peace and reconciliation. The article first examines the emerging conceptual frameworks that formed the basis for work with an indigenous rural women's empowerment project based in Tailevu province, Fiji. It then considers work with an urban-based multicultural women's group that grew out of the Blue Ribbon peace vigils in Suva. The final section considers the implications of this field experience for enhanced political participation, nation building and continued peace and stability in Fiji.

### **Emerging conceptual frameworks for gender and development**

The rural women's initiative began 12 months before the coup and the ensuing political crisis in 2000. It took a strong proactive approach to gender and development, and later adopted a reactive position in the aftermath of the coup in March of the same year. The urban group emerged as a result of, and in response to, the coup. Since then, the urban group has become more proactive as it settled into a routine of ongoing reconciliation and peace-building.

### **Before the coup: March 1999 to the present**

My involvement in rural women's empowerment began on my return to Fiji after completing doctoral study at the Australian National University in Canberra. Because I had a willing audience, a creditable background of prior experience with women and youth training in the communities, and easy access to seats of influence and leadership in the province, the task before me was not as daunting as I had initially expected.<sup>1</sup>

To ensure that the project was successful it was crucial that certain assumptions about Fijian society formed the ground rules and, in turn, guided the process of rural women's empowerment on the ground. The social and political undercurrents following the election of the Fiji Labour Party suggested it was the right time to embark on a proactive approach that would focus on developing skills and building capacities in rural communities.

A five-year project called the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama (TSSV) provincial women's project began in mid-1999. It had three broad aims:

- to develop a methodology of capacity building at grassroots level that incorporated issues of gender and governance aimed at empowering rural women;
- to document a rural model that would lay the basis for similar projects in the other 13 provinces of Fiji; and

- to develop the project's potential for transferability and adaptability among other small island states around the Pacific region.

After the first 18 months of this project a methodology had emerged (Nabalarua 2001). The move to the second phase of capacity building on a nationwide basis, using the Tailevu model, has been delayed because of funding restrictions.

The vision, conceptual framework, design and implementation of this project was initiated and coordinated by the author. The criteria that have guided intervention in both projects provide insights into the parameters of facilitating change at community level, and are discussed below.

### **Social impact**

Using a multidisciplinary approach, this project aims to fulfill a range of learning objectives at different levels. At the level of applied research, it attempts to provide viable options for addressing rural women's drudgery and poverty through increased access to development opportunities. This has meant looking at development applications that integrate indigenous knowledge systems with conventional organisational practices adapted to suit the particularities of a changing rural subsistence economy.

At the level of the community, and among the women themselves, learning by doing and using empowerment approaches that facilitate and expand upon knowledge produced a greater commitment to the aims of the project. From the position of policymakers, development specialists, researchers, trainers and adult learners involved in community development, the documentation process would in turn form the basis of a case study rich in ethnographic data. This case study can provide significant information for policy-making and development intervention on the ground.

### **Target outreach**

This project has been implemented within the framework of the largest indigenous women's group in the province, namely, the TSSV. All Fijian women may either choose to be members or, if they are registered as indigenous Fijians, they become members automatically. They may assume either active or latent membership status. Since the TSSV directs its services to women classified as household or group producers between the ages of 15 and 59 years, there are approximately 7,000 women whose lives are actively or latently influenced by the project.

Monitoring activities continue throughout the project cycle, and the year 2005 has been put aside for project evaluation. The impact of this project on the women of Tailevu province and their families will be measured by the number of new opportunities for income generation, the extent of poverty reduction, the extent to which income bases have been expanded, and the increased participation and representation of women at all levels of decision making at provincial level.

### **Creativity and innovation**

I was able to create a provincial model for rural women's empowerment because I could see the existing capacity gaps at provincial level. Money, or the lack of it, was not a determining factor in the evolution of the project, because the guiding principle was to first develop a creditable strategy that would warrant future funding support. With minor restructuring in the first six months, the TSSV has to date a little fewer than 200 TSSV officials on the ground servicing around 145 villages and settlements spread over the 22

districts that comprise Tailevu province. The project has put in place an organised network of women who have been trained in data collection, data processing and information dissemination throughout communities.

This project is an innovative landmark in many ways. In a project designed so that it can be replicated at local, regional and national levels within its life cycle, each phase feeds off, and relates to, the other. Such local, regional and national integration is seldom seen in many Pacific island development projects.

This is the first comprehensive project on rural women's empowerment in Fiji. In particular, it is the first of its kind to emerge from the grassroots at provincial level. It is also the first to develop a model for rural women's empowerment that will be replicable in the other 13 provinces of the country.

This is also the first indigenous women's project in which the documentation of a process of self-development has been managed and controlled by provincial women themselves. The project design incorporates new ways of organising and participating to separate traditional leadership from member-driven leadership. A strategic plan specifically compiled for the project is a key document for the women in the province, because it locates the current provincial demographic profile for health, education, housing and economic activity in a national context. It therefore provides significant indicators about priorities for development of which the women should be aware and that they should address.

The use of the Fijian language as the medium of communication and dissemination of information in all documents, with the exception of the strategic plan, is an important factor in obtaining local ownership of and commitment to the project.

### **Vision, goal setting and problem solving**

The vision for the project was the empowerment of rural women, to make them effective in taking control of their lives and making a difference in their own communities. Training developed skills and involved widespread consultation. Group dynamics and teamwork were reflected in the processes of goal setting and problem solving. While it was the author's vision that originally initiated and activated the project, it later became the collective vision of the TSSV, once the project was endorsed by the organisation's leaders and members.

### **Replicability**

With the project now going into its third year and the documentation continuing, it is ready to be replicated in Fiji's other 13 provinces.

### **Capacity building**

Capacity building is the core of this project because empowering rural women, especially Fijian women, requires increased capacity as a springboard for raising awareness and exercising timely and informed choices. Newly acquired skills, self-esteem and confidence levels are reflected in the effective articulation and increased participation and representation of women at village and district meetings. This indicates an increasing recognition among women of the importance of exercising basic rights. The high attendance of the 44 women leaders at most of the meetings and the workshops in the province in the past 12 months indicates a willingness to take on new options accruing from learning opportunities and a commitment to a common vision.

## **Local ownership**

The project was structured so its ownership has always been in the hands of the women themselves. This has proved valuable because, while the project architect has been living in New Zealand, the project is being sustained and monitored by the women leaders and the TSSV officials. Regarding the ownership of the intellectual property of the project, it has been my wish that, while this project has been turned into a TSSV project, the women of Tailevu should take pride in sharing knowledge and information and establishing networks with women in the other provinces.

It was suggested that a model that works is the most practical and valuable contribution to rural women's empowerment around the country that women in Tailevu could ever make. It would be a modest gesture on our part to provide this information to other provinces and one that would not be easily forgotten by women from those other provinces. A lack of funding is the only reason why the TSSV has not been able to replicate this project in the other provinces, despite repeated requests from provincial women and other leaders.

## **Development ethics in the field**

I was constantly reminded by village elders of the need to ensure that dignity and integrity were acknowledged and respected throughout the development process. This was built into the methodologies and processes used. It meant walking with the people and creating self-determined spaces along the way where they could stand and belong.

The TSSV project continues, and has maintained a high profile in the province. Because the project was established before the coup in March 2000, it has been an important stabilising factor in the face of pockets of civil 'disobedience' into which many of the villages and communities were unwittingly drawn during the period of anxiety and social upheaval immediately after the coup.

## **After the coup: March 2000 to the present**

This examination of the urban-based women's project that emerged after the coup, which used the same criteria as those above, attempts to show the extent to which the common parameters of the project can be replicated in different contexts.

fem'LINKpacific: Media Initiatives for Women is a Suva-based women's NGO committed to linking women with the media, bringing stories of women and their communities to the forefront, and sharing these stories with the rest of society. This initiative was born out of the Blue Ribbon peace vigils that occurred during the period of the coup, and has since been committed to increasing awareness of critical social, political and economic issues.

The movement provides a public means for promoting peace and reconciliation in Fiji, and it has continued to grow in terms of outcomes and outreach. Much of its work is funded by aid agencies. With the exception of project-funded staff, the five professional women who make up the collective, including the trustees, provide a voluntary service specifically for women. This organisation emerged at just the right time to maximise its ability to operate without burdensome bureaucratic restrictions.

During the 56 days in the immediate aftermath of the coup, when the predominantly Labour parliamentarians were being kept as hostages in Parliament House, the vigils assumed greater meaning day by day, and mobilised increasing numbers of people. The local and international press spread our faces across newspaper and television screens as a reminder to the rest of the world that a peaceful resolution was what many people

hoped for. The Anglican Church, which hosted the peace vigils, became the focal refuge point, the safety house, a place for peace and a haven of hope.

### **Social impact**

This project's multicultural focus and its outreach to the wider community meant that a vibrant and fresh social consciousness emerged. This had wide appeal because the members of the group were articulate communicators whose interpersonal dynamics made their alliances cohesive and clear. Raising awareness through the appropriate media, and being media friendly, they developed a good social rapport with the public at large.

### **Creativity and innovation**

The level of creativity and innovation lies in the group's professional expertise and the way it has been able to develop projects and obtain funding as a collective. Since fem'LINKpacific's inception, the group has produced videos for peace, reconciliation and nation building, and organised local, regional and national workshops on peace-related themes with other NGOs. They have worked with other women's groups in compiling the NGO report on the status of women in Fiji, and have maintained a regular electronic link with partners across the globe.

### **Target outreach**

Because this organisation is media focused, its work has been screened in the large theatres in town, with smaller groups and communities having access to videotapes for group viewing, discussion and feedback. The work touches on the daily common struggles of women to meet basic needs and to achieve common goals, such as good education for their children, decent housing and good health care. The group's output emphasises the collective right of women to have a quality family life, and to strive towards peaceful coexistence and harmony. The project was also part of a national children's art and literary workshop for peace, run in conjunction with Fiji TV and primary schools.

### **Vision, goal setting and problem solving**

The vision of bringing the stories of women and their communities to the forefront of media exposure in order to raise social awareness is the main reason for fem'LINK's existence. The use of multilingual media programs to empower women by raising awareness has meant that the project's multicultural focus is being addressed and sustained.

### **Replicability**

The fem'LINK project has been arranged so that it is replicable throughout island nations in the region in terms of its social appropriateness, cultural sensitivity and cost effectiveness. The use of some of its programs in other Pacific Island countries has been anticipated, and where requests have come through, such initiatives have been endorsed by the Management Collective of fem'LINK in collaboration with the requesting agencies from around the Pacific.

### **Capacity building**

Raising capacities by using the media means that the pace of learning is faster than it would otherwise be. Focusing on human rights, communication for peace and making

informed choices allows fem'LINK to reach different communities at different levels, because each community responds to common gaps in knowledge that need to be consistently filled.

### **Local ownership**

The collective takes ownership of all the planning, implementation and evaluation of project activities. Decisions are collectively based and there is a sense of equality in the work ethos of fem'LINK.

### **Development ethics in the field**

The professional calibre of the collective and the trustees demands a high level of accountability and transparency in all activities. Because fem'LINKpacific works largely with women in communities, there is an expectation that its team will show and earn respect while working in the field.

### **The implications of these experiences for political participation in Fiji**

Overall, the impact of the rural women's project on development is reflected in the high profile that this project has among indigenous Fijian institutions, among other women's groups outside the province, and among indigenous Fijian women themselves. The women of Tailevu province see that they own something special in the form of this project. In a strategic context, their willingness to offer their services as facilitators in the replication of this project is an indication of its value and importance as cultural and intellectual property.

Current social and political instability in Fiji has shown that there is a glaring gap between the levels of fundamental skills and knowledge at national and community levels in areas such as basic human rights, indigenous rights and women's rights. Women often don't understand electoral systems and the functions of a constitution, and often don't understand that they can exercise political choice. Aspects of governance and its application at provincial level, coupled with gender concerns and leadership for social change, are new development ideas that are known only to those who have had tertiary education. This is being addressed by fem'LINKpacific.

While the central focus for both projects has been on capacity building through awareness raising, advocacy and application, the main issues that have been integrated and addressed in this process include:

- empowering women by skilling them and enhancing their existing knowledge base;
- increasing women's participation and representation;
- gender and development issues;
- strengthening structures of microgovernance at community level;
- developing leadership dynamics for social change;
- resolving conflict and building peace;
- human rights, women's rights, indigenous rights and the exercise of choice;
- environmental concerns and sustainability;
- addressing basic needs;
- alleviating poverty and providing equity of access;
- improving income-generating options in a household economy; and
- maximising human resource development for increased quality of life options.

These issues are common concerns nationwide. The rural women's project in Tailevu province shows that, in enhancing political participation on the ground, this multidisciplinary emphasis has paved the way for the emergence of a group of more informed and increasingly articulate individuals in the 145 villages of the province (Nabalarua 2001).

Both women's organisations have a strong Christian base and, while they served two totally different groups, issues such as service, survival and solidarity soon became the common ground for all women during the post-coup period. The experiences discussed here show us that the pathways to political participation can take many different forms. The differences between a largely conservative indigenous women's group and a modern, progressive multicultural urban women's group reflect important gaps in capacities that each has now filled. Both groups have achieved successful outcomes given their size and mandate and, I believe, they complement each other's development aspirations well.

Equally important is the fact that they have the potential to continue contributing towards peace, stability and reconciliation at the community level. In turn, this has the potential to continue to enhance political participation and nation building in the country as a whole (Nabalarua 2000).

## **Conclusion**

These two women's groups, although different in their make-up, have shown that there is an urgent need to work at community level in promoting systems of good governance. There is no place for a process that is self-serving and self-perpetuating. If we continue operating with colonial constructs and processes that stereotype development experiences then our efforts will be futile and redundant because they will not respond to the changing aspirations and expectations of the new Pacific generation.

## **Note**

1. From 1999-2000, the author was a women's representative on the Tailevu Provincial Council and deputy provincial leader of the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama (TSSV), a predominantly rural Fijian women's group operating in the province. Although she has relocated for work purposes to New Zealand in 2001, she continues to maintain her links with both women's groups.

## **References**

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