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Gender and the role of the media in conflict and peacemaking: The Fiji experience

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Introduction

An environment that maintains peace and promotes and protects human rights, democracy and peaceful reconciliation is an important factor for the advancement of women. Peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men, and with development. As we have experienced recently in Fiji, the equal access to and full participation of women in power structures and in the prevention and resolution of conflicts are essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Despite the progress made since the proclamation of the decade for women in 1975, gender disparities and unacceptable inequalities still remain. What is more, these negative conditions are further exacerbated by conflict.

Although women have begun to play an important role in conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and defence and foreign affairs mechanisms, they are still underrepresented in decision making processes. Therefore, if women are to play an equal part in securing and maintaining peace, they must not be showered with 'political rhetoric' but be encouraged to find empowerment through workable, culturally appropriate economic activity, to be able to afford to take the responsibilities of participation in decision making. People will respond to strategies which offer tangible, life-changing opportunities. (I equate the process with some of the simplest, most cost-effective yet successful advertising campaigns.)

The media *is* our affair

As a response to the lack of women-centred stories in the mainstream media, fem'LINKpacific: Media Initiatives for Women has been established. It is a stand-alone women's non government organisation (NGO) that will work specifically to ensure that women's voices are heard, by trying to balance the scales in pursuit of equality and social justice and by critically looking, through the eyes of women, at the current developments in our country.

We are empowered by the call to action for NGOs through the strategic objectives outlined in Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action: to increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision making in and through the media and new technologies; and to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. Thus, fem'LINKpacific has undertaken to:

- advocate/facilitate the increased participation of women in media decision making to promote a gender-sensitive media content;
- work for increased access by women in new communications technologies;
- promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media;
- facilitate media ownership by women through the fem'LINKpacific Trust; and
- ensure women have access to a wide range of media products, as both producers and consumers.

There is an urgent need for a democratic people to think clearly, without the distortions due to unconscious and unrecognised bias. It is a concern that remains with many women's NGOs today because we work to strengthen democratic structures and to increase representative, participatory decision making, particularly where it is lacking for women and minorities. We are called upon, more and more, to pay attention to the huge influence that media has on our societies and the world. We need to be able to decode messages, interpret issues, and understand how they hinder or help our goals of achieving gender equity and social and economic justice.

During the past decade, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults. Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women, but despite the increasing number of women employed in the media industry few have attained positions at the decision making level to have the capacity or opportunity to influence media policy. The lack of gender sensitivity in the media is evidenced by the failure to eliminate the gender based stereotyping found in public and private local, national and international media organisations.

The Fiji experience

The National Council of Women Fiji (NCWF) was established in 1968 to address the desire of women in Fiji to have a national coordinating body for the various multi-ethnic women's groups that were being established to address the social, economic and political issues emerging during the period of pre-independence.

Since then, the NCWF has spearheaded a range of activities designed to improve the status of women at all community levels. Forging a strong partnership with government (even prior to the establishment of the Ministry of Women and Culture in 1987) and working with a large network of affiliate members, the NCWF has been an effective go-between for both the government and civil society, providing an avenue to protect women's interests and ensuring their participation in development.

The movement for gender equality the world over has been one of the defining developments of our time. The Women's Agenda has been at the forefront of many national achievements in the last 30 years of independence in Fiji. The NCWF can look proudly at the development and progress of our country 'through women's eyes' and continue in its initial role as an umbrella organisation, bringing together affiliates with common concerns while also addressing specific needs and interests.

On 20 May 2000, the NCWF issued its first media statement denouncing the 19 May coup and began mobilising members for a peace and prayer vigil, which began on 21 May. This vigil became our key Women in Community action in response to the coup and the illegal detention of the members of parliament. The vigil, held in Holy Trinity Anglican Cathedral, brought together women, men and children in a peaceful demonstration and with a collective and unified voice:

- to denounce the actions of 19 May 2000;
- to call for the immediate and safe release of the hostages;
- to call for the restoration of the democratic process, as outlined in the 1997 Constitution; and
- to reaffirm the need for all Fiji Islanders to unify in peaceful solidarity for the future of our country.

Why a peace and prayer vigil? Significantly, this was the most appropriate form of demonstration at the time. The ongoing violence and the threat of violence meant that

public protest demonstrations were impossible. There was also a general feeling of shock and dismay that everyone needed to deal with before we tackled the situation from any other angle.

The vigil brought together not only members of the NCWF affiliates but also the women's movement generally, as well as the greater community. The response was very positive, considering the situation – we had not expected that the vigil would gather such momentum.

We began the Women in Black campaign and the Candlelight of Hope initiative that first weekend – and we found, with each day, that we were able to collectively face what was happening to our country. As we began to meet the family members of the hostages, we realised that they too were drawing strength from the vigil. This motivated us further and saw the development of the Women's Action for Democracy and Peace Initiative/Campaign within the framework of the NCWF. I believe that keeping focused on the principles and purpose of the daily vigils kept the campaign on track. The Blue Ribbon Initiative has become a very important symbol for our future actions.

We also recognised that this was a very important time to continue the work of the NCWF, particularly to integrate a gender advocacy perspective into the media coverage of and since 19 May, and to communicate NCWF concerns to international partners and associates to seek support for the Women's Action for Democracy and Peace/Vigil Action.

Strategies for the future

Women's Action for Democracy and Peace

In the midst of the May crisis, the NCWF established the Women's Action for Democracy and Peace (WAD'aP) campaign/steering committee to continue to address the long-term impact and consequences of the crisis and to maintain a gender perspective in the future developments of the period of reconciliation and reconstruction.

WAD'aP recognised the need to focus attention in a number of specific areas for the long term. The working groups hope to be able to address, wherever possible, the particular needs of members and affiliates around the country, in partnership with other women NGOs and civil society partners. The overall objectives of WAD'aP are:

- to identify actions that will promote the fundamental freedom and human rights of every citizen of Fiji;
- to promote multiculturalism throughout the community, and especially through the existing networks of affiliates and other civil societies;
- to inform the international community of (a) actions and initiatives undertaken by the council and other affiliates in response to the current crisis, and (b) seek their support of identified actions;
- to continue to inform the authorities and relevant bodies of the official position of the council and other affiliates in response to the current crisis;
- to undertake post-conflict rehabilitation programmes through existing networks of affiliates and other civil societies; and
- to publicise through the media the initiatives taken by affiliates and civil societies in promoting multiculturalism, reconciliation and healing.

As the national umbrella body for women's organisations, in partnership with many other women's NGOs and civil society partners, the NCWF will remain proactive and responsive to the social, political, economic and spiritual needs of women and children in Fiji, through programmes and activities identified and designed by members of the

Human Rights and Peace, Multiculturalism, Good Governance and Women's Economic Rights working groups.

The WAD'aP Kids: Fiji of the Future creative expression project, assisted by the Canada Fund, will be a pilot project based on promoting peace and multiculturalism through 'art'in 40 primary schools. This activity, like future WAD'aP projects, will also involve concerned young women and mothers from our membership to ensure effective implementation.

fem'LINKpacific: Media Initiatives for Women

Many women's NGOs outside the Pacific region have already successfully established a range of feminist media initiatives to assist in the further advancement of women, such as Radio Sagarmatha, Nepal; Sister Namibia; Milenia, the feminist collective radio station in Lima, Peru; FemNet in Africa; and FemPress in Latin America. There was no such media initiative in the Pacific prior to 19 May.

Fem'LINKpacific will be a permanent Communications/Documentation NGO, 'linking women's organisations with the media' through the documentation and production of specific media outputs, including:

- a quarterly women's newspaper supplement in the Fijian, Hindi and English languages;
- monthly women's radio programmes in the English, Fijian and Hindustani languages;
- a quarterly women's 'life' video magazine for distribution to NGOs to generate discussion and dialogue at all levels of society; and
- ongoing documentation of women's programmes: not only those developed in response to 19 May but also historical accounts of the women's movement in Fiji.

Conclusion

The World Association of Christian Communicators Global Media Monitoring Report highlighted the fact that the particular significance of women's absence from news lies in the increasingly central role played by the news media in setting the agenda for public debate. By prioritising certain topics and ignoring others completely, and by giving a voice to certain social or political actors and not to others, the dominant news agenda tells us who and what is important. It creates pictures in our heads, pictures from which entire areas of experience are effectively blanked out. Studies in a limited number of countries have shown that the picture of the world provided by today's news media is one in which women barely exist. It is a world structured and inhabited overwhelmingly by men.

So, even though women are a major demographic in advertising promotions by the media industry, which casts them in limited roles and objectifies them to influence the community to choose one product or service over another, they are not yet sufficiently represented in the media hierarchy to influence the industry, which recognises woman-power but hesitates to use it at decision making levels.

While Fiji boasts a high proportion of women in newsrooms and in radio and television production, pertinent issues in feminist media scholarship remain extremely relevant today. This revolves around the relationship between the gender of journalists or media practitioners, and the gender of news actors. Underlying a great deal of debate about women's participation in the news has been the assumption that, if more women

were employed in the media, media content might change. The hypothesis that a greater number of female journalists or practitioners would lead to a differing ordering of priorities in news selection, or to a larger proportion of female news actors and interviewees, has yet to be proven. Current data are still unable to answer the question of whether female journalists consciously seek out women as interviewees, or whether they deliberately make an effort to cover stories of special concern to women.

Furthermore, many research studies have also shown that women are rarely called upon to give 'expert' opinion. The provision of expert opinion in the news is a relatively male prerogative. When women's opinion is sought on a particular issue, it tends to be in terms of their role as 'ordinary people' or 'persons in the street' whose occupation may be considered unimportant to the opinion they are asked to express. Because men are more frequently consulted as authorities, their occupations are more frequently specified. And, even when these occupations are not actually relevant to the issue being discussed, studies of media content have found that job titles are more likely to be provided in the case of male than of female contributors.

In order to make the media work for us, we must continue to lobby the media industry to develop people-centred and gender-mainstream policies and to become more accountable to their target audience – upon whom their 'return on investment' is based. At the same time, we must continue to develop *our own* media initiatives to:

- accelerate the promotion of peaceful conflict resolution, reconciliation and tolerance;
- promote 'best practice' education, training, community actions and youth programmes which can be shared by likeminded NGOs;
- encourage the further development of peace research, involving the participation of women;
- examine the impact of conflict on women and children;
- document the nature and contribution of women's participation in national, regional and international peace movements; and
- engage in research and identify innovative mechanisms for containing violence.