



# **GENDER, POVERTY AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN FIJI:**

***GRASSROOTS-LED FEMINIST  
AND HUMAN RIGHTS ANALYSIS  
BY THE DIVA POVERTY TO POWER NETWORK***







# GENDER, POVERTY AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN FIJI:

*GRASSROOTS-LED FEMINIST  
AND HUMAN RIGHTS ANALYSIS*

*BY THE DIVA POVERTY TO POWER NETWORK*



Grassroots feminist analysis from Fiji women and gender diverse people in the Poverty to Power Network who live in a high poverty environment, with DIVA for Equality Management Collective and staff. The network includes single mothers, women in single-headed households, widows, sex workers, women with disabilities, LGBTQ+ women and gender

non binary people who face discrimination at all levels. Many are experiencing or survivors of gender-based violence. We are an intersectional, intergenerational group. DIVA for Equality accompanies & financially supports the work, and members of staff and MC are part of the network.

# Resilience is She



Camari Serau, feminist poet, Lautoka, Fiji

Ask me about strength,  
and I will tell you about women  
who carry continents on their backs,  
the Northern stars on their shoulders,  
their palms, like earth, raise life  
and shape pebbles into boulders,  
shift spirit  
into bodies,

I will tell you that their spines  
only recognize the word,  
'Rise!'  
that the soul of all war cries  
is conceived in these women's eyes,  
and that it thrives  
like a sacred language on their tongue,  
it survives the rupture of their lungs  
when they lay their own breath  
to give life to daughters  
and to sons.

Ask me about courage,  
and I will tell you she is the whisper  
that every girl knows as Spirit  
within her –

the warrior in her voice,  
the deity in her speech,  
she is the spitting image of God,  
the masterpiece unleashed.

Ask me about resistance,  
and I will show you the scars  
the traces of blade, bone and teeth  
scattered across my skin like stars  
I will read to you the poems  
I will gift you the chants  
be beside you at every protest  
turning riot into art.

Ask me about hope,  
and I will show you immortality  
for even when life dies, hope stays alive  
searching for a home inside of me.  
Saying, "giving up is not an option;  
all that you are given, you can handle  
If the world crumbles, and in the wreckage, order  
yields to mess,  
there is still purpose,  
keep your focus  
on the rise and fall of your chest."

Ask me about resilience,  
and I will tell you about her -  
her ability to make herself whole again  
her will to turn pain into power

Now she blesses her body,  
when she dresses her wounds  
she grows mountains from valleys,  
She makes suns out of moons.

When the depths try to swallow her whole,  
she remembers how far her roots go -  
entwined around others just like hers,  
she knows she is never alone

she has persisted through lifetimes  
in her resistance, she is free  
ask me about resilience,  
I will tell you, resilience is  
She.

# FOREWORD



Friends all,

DIVA for Equality is a feminist collective that started in 2011, and provides practical urgent action and support to lesbian, bisexual women, transgender people and upon demand to women of all backgrounds in Fiji and the Pacific, and their communities. We work with others to create and facilitate safe spaces and processes to organise and communicate constituency positions. We build and sustain strong hubs and networks of activists, and increase levels of constructive collaboration within wider civil society and social movements. We fight for socio-economic, ecological justice and human

rights. Our politics determine every aspect of DIVA for Equality. Today we are a busy, well-known, fierce and loving feminist civil society group building social movements from local to global for ourselves, other species and the living Planet.

The Poverty to Power network emerged in DIVA networks in 2015 and increased in strength from 2019 with a dedicated programme and Coordinator. DIVA for Equality worked throughout 2022 -2023 to strengthen personal and collective activism on gender, poverty and economic justice, through a pro-poor feminist, human rights framework in Fiji and the Pacific.



In 2024 our main vision is to strengthen DIVA for Equality's work to end poverty and build economic justice using a feminist framework informed and led by LGBTQ+ women and gender diverse people who experience daily poverty, injustice and disenfranchisement from state and society, and are actively working for change for themselves and others.

The network members include women and people in all their intersectional identities and from high poverty settings in the DIVA network from Western, Central and Eastern Divisions of Fiji. Poverty to Power members discuss, learn and work together on issues of human rights and justice, poverty, socio-economic, ecological and climate justice. The work is carried out through intensive workshops at the DHIVE Community Centre in Nadi, mutual aid networks, direct action, referral to other DIVA and external support programmes and through a closed online solidarity social media messaging hub.

Our clear goal is to continue to build local, national and regional movements that will transform work on gender, poverty and economic justice. We demand stronger gender-just, pro-poor policies and programmes by government, development institutions and civil society at national, regional and global levels. We want to see poverty rates go down in Fiji and the Pacific region, and women engaged in all kinds of economic and ecological justice work that brings them more freedom, balance and justice. Read the brave and insightful life stories from our network. Support the Poverty to Power programme. Join us online or in Fiji communities.

**Love and light to all readers,  
The Poverty to Power Network, Fiji, and DIVA for  
Equality, Nadi, Fiji**

# Acknowledgements

DIVA for Equality and the Poverty to Power Network express deepest appreciation to the following Organizations, Allies and Accomplices, Poverty to Power Grassroots Activists and Leaders for their contributions to the programme and Network, and this booklet.

- **Salote Tinairomila** DIVA for Equality Nadi Hub
- **Sheleni Lata** Shri Mahila Mandal Nausori
- **Anne Wilmar** Poverty to Power Network Nadi
- **Tony Ratabua** DIVA for Equality Central Hub and Women Builders Network
- **Sainiana Tinai** Ba Hart Women's Group
- **Narieta Marama** DIVA for Equality Lautoka Hub
- **Mereani Tokainakoro** Nawaka Women's Group
- **Varanisese Gonei** Poverty to Power Network Sakoca, Tacirua
- **Rusila Bakabaka**, Navokai Hart Nadi
- **Alesi Tabua**, Namulomulu Women's Group Tailevu
- **Savena Devi** Ra Shir Shewa Shabha Women's Group
- **Anonymous**, Poverty to Power Member
- **Kalesita Ralase** Navutu Women's Group Lautoka
- **Naomi Lasese**, Poverty to Power Network Korovuto Nadi
- **Miliame Loco**, Poverty to Power Network Saweni Lautoka
- **Cakacaka Katia**, Poverty to Power Network Tunalia Nadi
- **Luisa Uluirewa**, Women Builders Network Central
- **Manjula Ram**, Poverty to Power Network Central
- **Sereima Damuni** DIVA for Equality Central
- **Penina Tusoya**, Staff member, DIVA for Equality
- **Naomi Vuni**, Tailevu South Disability Women's Group
- **Savena Devi**, Poverty to Power Network Western
- **Kalesita Ralase**, Poverty to Power Network Western
- **DIVA for Equality LBTQIA+ Hub focal points**, Nadi, Lautoka, Sigatoka and Central
- **Viva Tatawaqa**, Management Collectives DIVA for Equality
- **Vika Kalokalo**, Management Collectives, DIVA for Equality
- **Tima Tamoi**, Management Collectives, DIVA for Equality
- **Shirley Tagi**, Board Representative Mentor, DIVA for Equality
- **Frances Cabrine Tawake**, Poverty to Power Coordinator, DIVA for Equality, Co-author
- **Noelene Nabulivou**, Executive Director, DIVA for Equality, Co-author
- **Recognising DIVA feminist and progressive funder partners who enable the organisation to develop feminist programmes over time through action & reflection cycles, since 2011.** This includes **Astraea Lesbian Foundation, Mama Cash, Thousand Currents, Global Fund for Women, Urgent Action Fund Asia and Pacific, Pacific Feminist Fund, Pacific Feminist Alliance for Climate Justice, and others.**



# Glossary

**Care Work** refers to labour or tasks that involve taking care of others, often in a domestic or caregiving context. This type of work includes activities such as childcare, eldercare, nursing, and other forms of caregiving and support provided to individuals who may be unable to care for themselves. Care work is typically associated with providing physical, emotional, and sometimes medical support to those in need, and it can be performed both as paid work and within family, kinship or other informal caregiving settings. Generally, States and societies do not yet properly record, acknowledge nor reward the extent to which care work exists, and by whom it is done.

**Capitalism** Economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state or as public-public cooperatives. The essential motivation of capitalism is to make profit.

**Communal work** refers to labour or tasks that are carried out collectively by a group of people within a household, community or social group. It involves individuals coming together to work on a shared project, task, or goal for the benefit of the community or group as a whole. Communal work can take various forms, such as community life rituals, clean-up events, agricultural cooperative work, collaborative construction or other projects. It often embodies principles of cooperation and mutual support within a community. We can usefully determine who is carrying out the majority of care work; why and how to recognise, reduce, redistribute, reward, represent and reconfigure society and state toward decent, just communal work.

**Decolonisation** is the practice of undoing coloniality and colonialism, a process where imperial nations establish and dominate external territories and retain control and management of knowledge by supposed 'universals of Western modernity'. Decolonising includes the formal state withdrawal from power. It is also where oppressed, often Indigenous peoples identify, challenge, and revise or replace assumptions, ideas, values, and practices

that reflect a coloniser's dominating influence and white supremacist, Eurocentric dominating influence. Decolonisation is about accountability for both historical and current actions including ecocide and climate injustice, differentiated responsibilities, consequences for one's actions, redistributive justice and land back.

**Development as Freedom:** Amartya Sen was the winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics. *Development as Freedom* was published one year later and argues that development entails a set of linked freedoms: political freedoms and transparency in relations between people. The centre of Sen's work is what he calls a 'capability approach' where the basic concern of human development is 'our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value', rather than the measuring achievement by measurements such as gross domestic profit (GDP), technical progress, or industrialization.

**Domestic work** refers to tasks and responsibilities performed within a household or domestic setting. It includes a wide range of activities such as cleaning, cooking, laundry, childcare, eldercare, fetching water and food, and other household chores and responsibilities. Domestic work is carried out by individuals including family members and/or paid domestic workers to maintain a functioning, effective household environment. This work can be carried out by all genders but continues in many contexts to be normed as women's work. Feminists are working to change this so that domestic work is equitably shared by all in a household.

**Feminism** is a belief-system and board-based socio-political movement working for liberation, equality and human rights for everyone regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, sex characteristics, skin colour, age, disability and other intersectional characteristics. Feminist praxis has contextual manifestations and variations. Feminists recognise that there are patriarchal systems of relationships, beliefs, and values embedded in political, social, economic and ecological institutions and systems that structure

and perpetuate inequalities. Feminists work to end these systems and build new and just social systems, for all.

**Feminization of Poverty** refers to the phenomenon of women being disproportionately represented among the world's poor compared to men, as a result of patriarchal systems.

**Human Rights** are rights that are inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex and gender, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the promotion and protection of the right to life and liberty, right to development, the right to freedom from violence, slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, gender justice and women's human rights, the right to health, work and education, the right to a healthy environment, human rights in the context of climate change and much more. Everyone is entitled to these human rights, without discrimination.

**Inequality** is the quality of being unequal or uneven or an instance of facing social disparity and lack of fair treatment in economic and social aspects, often resulting in differences in opportunities, resources, and outcomes between different groups or individuals. This can be based on Indigeneity or settler status, race and skin colour, sex, gender and sexuality, disability, wealth, land ownership, citizenship status and other factors. Inequality manifests in experiences of differentiated oppression and privilege in individual relationships, group relationships, society and the State.

**Oppression** refers to the unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power, particularly when one group or individual systematically mistreats, subjugates, or unfairly dominates another group or individual. It involves the prolonged, severe, and pervasive mistreatment of people based on various factors, including race, gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics. Oppression can take many forms, including discrimination, harassment, marginalisation, and denial of human rights and opportunities. It is associated with the abuse of power and suppression of the rights and freedoms of marginalised or vulnerable individuals or groups. Oppression is a central concept in discussions of social, economic and climate justice, universal human rights,

ecological sustainability, equity and liberation.

**Patriarchy** is socio-political, economic and environmental organisation ordered for supremacy of a father in relationships, households, clans, family or communities, legal dependence of women and children, and resource ownership, descent and inheritance prioritised through the male line. Control by men of a disproportionately large share of individual, group, State and societal power, in law and in practice. Societies or institutions organised according to the principles and practices of patriarchy. Feminists work to end patriarchy and to achieve liberation, equity, balance and justice for all.

**Physiological Needs** are the bodily needs of humans that are essential for survival. These include: Food: Having access to nourishment and sustenance. Water and Sanitation: Having access to clean, safe drinking water and hygienic excretion of human waste. Shelter and Housing: Having a place to live that offers protection from the elements, safety and security. Sleep: Getting enough hours of regular rest and recuperation. Air: Having access to clean air for breathing. Clothing: Having suitable clothing for weather and climate conditions. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights:

**Poverty** is said to exist when people lack the means to satisfy their basic needs. Women's poverty is shaped by gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, social class, skin colour, race and ethnicity, Indigeneity, location, disability and many other intersectional identities and realities, and their context and conditions. Women are experiencing intensifying impoverishment in the form of income poverty, food poverty, water and sanitation poverty, time poverty, indebtedness, lack of rest and leisure, poverty caused by climate induced loss and damage, and more. Women's poverty is related to the large amount of paid and unpaid care and domestic and communal work undertaken and lack of recognition of this work by the State and society.

**Privilege** A right or benefit that is given to some people and not others. It is also a special opportunity that makes you proud. It is the unearned advantages or benefits that certain individuals or groups have in society due to factors such as their race, gender, socioeconomic status, or other aspects of their

identity. These advantages can often be invisible or taken for granted by those who possess them and can result in systemic inequalities.

**Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)** is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity, and the human rights therein. A positive approach to sexuality and reproduction should recognize the part played by pleasurable sexual relationships, trust and communication in promoting self-esteem and well-being. All individuals have a right to make decisions governing their bodies and to access services supporting that human right.

**Social floor** refers to a minimum level of resources and services, social protection, benefits and support that is guaranteed or provided by a government or society to ensure a basic standard of living for all citizens, and in recognition of existing inequalities, privilege and oppression in all societies and States. This concept is used in efforts to end poverty, reduce inequality within and between countries, and to promote social, economic, ecological and climate justice. The social floor may include access to essential services such as food, improved water and sanitation, healthcare, education, housing, and income support.

**Social protection** constitutes a wide range of legislation, policies, programs, and measures implemented by governments and societies to support individuals and households during various stages of life and in times of increased need. It aims to ensure a minimum standard of living, reduce poverty and inequality, and provide a safety net for violated, at-risk, vulnerable and marginalised individuals and groups including women and gender diverse people, not from a charity framework but arising from distributive and redistributive justice.

**Social infrastructure** refers to the physical and organisational structures, facilities, and systems that support and enhance well-being, quality of life, and complex socio-economic and ecological functioning of a community or society. Including a wide range of essential services, facilities, and networks that are vital for the functioning and cohesion of a society. Feminists work for gender-just domestic and foreign policy designed with coherent, strong and

resourced social floor, protection and infrastructure as part of an overall social provisioning approach.

**Social Provisioning Approach** refers to heterodox and historically specific feminist and heterodox analyses that pay attention to socio-economic and environmental structures, agency and actions of individuals and groups living in different contexts and conditions. These analyses pay attention to the ways that development outcomes are navigated through socio-economic, ecological and climate relations of conflict and cooperation, privilege, oppression, liberation and capture. Generally social-provisioning approaches include a focus on the care economy and unpaid labour as fundamental economic activities; well-being as a measure of economic success; analysis of economic, political, and social processes and power relations; inclusion of ethical goals and values as an intrinsic part of economic analysis; and an articulation of intersectional identities and interlinked concerns.

**Unconditional Cash Transfers** are cash payments provided to poor people without requiring anything in return. They have been variously used in health, education, dietary and other programmes, as redistributive justice.

**Universal Health Coverage and Access** means that all people have access to the full range of quality health services they need, when and where they need them, without financial hardship. It covers a full continuum of essential health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and palliative care.

**Universal Basic Income** refers to a payment made to all adult individuals (and in some proposals also children), that allows people to meet their basic needs. It is made without any work or activity tests. Generally three features are proposed, that is universal, unconditional and adequate (at a high enough level to protect people against poverty). There is not yet sufficient discussion on how to translate this into universal, globalised reality in all societies and States.

# Contents

<b>Resilience is She- Poem by Camari Serau</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Analysis By the Community (ABC): Poverty to Power Network</b>	<b>13</b>
Finding your beauty despite the challenges - Salote Tinairomila	14
Keep Shining your light - Sheleni Lata	15
Unbreakable Me - Anne Wilmar	16
Leaving no one behind - Tony Ratabua	17
Determination is POWER - Sainiana Tinai	18
Hustle - Narieta Marama	20
My Journey - Meredani Tokainakoro	22
The tough road - Varanisesse Gonewai	24
My Painful Reality - Rusila Bakabaka	26
Never Been Easy -Alesi Tabuavou	28
The Unpaid Love -Anonymous	29
Hustling to Survive - Naomi Lasese	30
Living one day at a time -Miliame Loco	32
Learning to dance in the rain - Katia Cakacaka	34
Light at the end of every tunnel - Luisa Uluirewa	36
Being Positive is the key - Manjula Ram	38
Rising from Poverty- Sereima Damuni	39
The Will to Overcome Poverty - Penina Tusoya	40
The essence of life is the Power of sharing Love- Naomi Vuni	42
We rise by lifting others- Savena Devi	43
She remembered who she was and the game changed - Frances Tawake	45
Breaking the chain of Poverty - Kalisita Ralase	47
Better Now than Never- Vivania Tatawaqa.	48
<b>DIVA Analysis : Feminist and Gender-just approaches to Poverty Eradication - Noelene Nabulivou and Frances Tawake</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>References and Resources</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Contacts</b>	<b>68</b>

Here are the stories and analysis of 23 women and gender diverse people from the Poverty to Power Network working for economic justice in Fiji, and globally.

# Analysis By Community (ABC)



“Solidarity with the poor is not the same as empathy. Many people feel sorry for the poor or identify with their suffering yet do nothing to alleviate it.” - bell hooks, feminist



## Finding your beauty despite the challenges - *Salote Tinairomila*



Life continues to be tough for me and as a young woman, I have never found the privilege to be free or enjoy my life to the fullest. This is just one of the many chapters of my life. If I had to write all the misery that I had faced for the past 38 years, I would fill up this book.

In an empty house, on a dark cold night, I laid alone. I felt a hand push aside the curtains and touch my private parts. What could a five year old girl do at a moment like this? I was scared and I didn't know what to do. This abuse continued for a month, until I figured that my mom's Fijian comb would be the best weapon to use against him. Many Fijian women carry this comb because it beautifies them, but because of my mom's social life and gatherings at home, she did not realise that her Fijian comb was being used by her own daughter, to defend herself. It has been so hard. My mum passed away when I reached class 5 and I was shattered. My dad remarried, and it was again a dark tunnel. I continued to work hard to touch those unreachable rays of sunshine. I was brought up in a different home where love was never felt or seen, and I ended up on the streets for 3 years. I felt that this was the best place for me and I found comfort with my friends. Later, I did odd jobs where I was able to sustain my life. I was never accepted into my family

because of my sexual orientation, but still I was often required to give my contributions to family functions (iTaukei: soli). My family would reach out to me for financial support and to contribute to family soli, thinking that I had the capacity to give more. In reality I continued to struggle through life. At times, I would even go without meals.

I realised that this is not the end of the tunnel for me. I was fortunate to participate in the DIVA space which helped me a lot, to gain skills, knowledge and encouragement in many ways that I can improve and overcome my circumstances. I tried to reflect on my hopes and not my fears.

My recommendation is that a lot of work needs to be done to accompany and safeguard girls and young women. They should be encouraged to speak up when they face violence and abuse so that our stories of survival are not repeated over and again. I hope that my story will inspire other young women out there and be a learning lesson to parents who spend their time and energy away from their homes. Your children will remember your absence from home, in years to come. JUST LIKE ME.

# Keep Shining your light

## - *Sheleni Lata*



I am Sheleni Lata. I am a single mother of two from Nausori. I have had many ups and downs in my life. I had three other siblings – two sisters and a brother who have all passed away, including my father. I am the only child alive, with my mother.

My mother was the second eldest daughter of ten siblings from a well-off family and married a middle class man. After a few years of marriage, my dad became a heart patient. From that time, poverty crept into our home. Mum had to work in different homes to put meals on the table and dad started abusing her, demanding money for grog and cigarettes. When my mother refused to give him money, he would hit her. My siblings and I saw this. We hardly cooked, had no lunch for school and only had one school uniform each. We had no underwear, bras or half-slips, and no umbrellas for school during the rainy season.

At the age of 15yo, my father died. My mother had an operation and stayed home for months. I started working to help my older brother and sister. Our life changed from that time - family and relatives started visiting and at the age of 24, I also got married. After I had my firstborn child, my life became miserable. I experienced the same domestic violence my mother faced. My older brother died, and then my two

sisters also died from domestic violence. I started doing small jobs like catering, housekeeping, baby sitting and singing at weddings to help my husband with shopping, but he took advantage of me.

During COVID19, work was slow. My husband was a taxi driver and needed payments for the taxi owner. Every now and then he asked me for money. If I said no, he would hit me. The domestic violence got worse every day, and I was tired of pretending that I was a happy wife. My children were also tired of the arguments, swearing and their father abusing and telling me off in front of everyone.

After joining DIVA for Equality, I was empowered and I started to fight off the abuse from my husband and fight for my rights and for my children. I started awareness programs for my women's group because all of them had been victims of domestic violence at some point. I really believe that I am not free while any other woman is unfree. I am a very strong woman now. I worked for friends and families with small pay and after filing for divorce, I worked even harder to overcome poverty. Overcoming poverty is not about charity, it is an act of justice. It is a human right and we have to protect ourselves, our right to dignity and a decent life.

# Unbreakable Me

## - Anne Wilmar



My name is Anna Wilma Whippy. I am originally from Kadavu and I was brought up in Savusavu on Vanua Levu, by my maternal grandmother. My mother's family was caring and all my needs and wants were provided. Life changed when I went to secondary school and I had more friends. I drank, went clubbing and smoked cigarettes when I was in Form Five. I didn't have contraceptives and I found out that I was pregnant. I didn't complete school. I had my baby and my family started questioning me on how I was going to look after my daughter.

It was so tough for me to experience becoming a single mother. A very challenging thing. After a year, I moved to Suva and got a job at a bar. It was hard night work but I had to work to support my child cared for by my grandmother on the island.

Then I met a partner and I stayed with him for 16 years. As I moved on with him, life was still tough. He hit me severely and I would often have a swollen face or a broken limb during those years. This abuse continued until he was murdered. His family treated my daughter and me quite badly when he died. We were in a very difficult situation so we moved out of Suva and came to Nadi. We looked for a place to stay and tried to find food. I was struggling with my daughter, but then we were lucky to find a small shed to live in. We struggled as there was no light for my daughter to use for studying. We live in a flood prone area and we share a bathroom and toilet with neighbours which is not easy for privacy. Life is never easy. I face discrimination from my

community because I can't contribute. I have the responsibility of feeding and caring for my entire household and I face choices between unpaid and paid work making me unsure and vulnerable. I have time allocation choices because I sacrifice my own well being for others but if I do anything for myself, I am judged.

I was so fortunate to join the DIVA Poverty to Power network. I am getting help and helping others. I am also inspired by hearing the voices of other women like me, who experience similar stories of pain, poverty and life. I don't want my daughters to go through what I faced. So I'm trying all my best to change the life that we are in right now. Moving out of poverty means that I need to work extra hard.



# Leaving no one behind

*-Tony Ratabua*



My name is Utoni Setaita Adilewa Ratabua. I am 40 years old. I was born in Nausori hospital and I'm from the chiefly island of Bau. I have three brothers and the only gay person in my family. I was adopted when I was only a month old. My new parents weren't as educated but the work that they did was educational. They were missionary pastors and most of the time they did evangelism in other countries. From 5 years old I started to travel with them. Life was beautiful during that time because I was given the opportunity to experience everything and moreover I was given what I needed, until I reached 18 years old.

I wanted to do something different and to explore more about the world. So I started to play rugby, soccer and then slowly started to have relationships. I faced a lot of challenges, especially peer pressure. I was trapped and I did not know how to be safe from many situations. I would be missing from home for weeks with my friends. I was not focused on any goals nor did I really have any for my life. I continued and it was also hard to fit into daily life because of my sexual orientation. My parents knew about it but they preferred not to talk about it with me so I was not sure how to address it. So most of the time of not knowing how to manoeuvre myself around my family, I found comfort with my friends facing similar situations.

I wanted to feel accepted, respected, loved and to have the freedom to love and express myself as who I Am - not what others wanted me to be. Then one

day I reached the peak where I thought, "I'm the only one responsible for life and if I need to move things I should be the one stepping up". So I focused on soccer, took up soccer coaching courses and I was able to join the team who travelled around Fiji primary schools to teach children the skills of soccer. That was a turning point for me. I began to experience more about life and meet different people.

Then I joined the DIVA Central Hub which is a group of LGBTQ+ and I participated in lots of activities. One day there was an open call for Women in Construction courses at APTC. I enrolled and was accepted. What a time. I was able to attain Certificates 1 & 2 in construction. I then began to work on construction sites and I was able to support myself financially. To be honest, it is not an easy task to fit into a male dominated field. One thing that I found challenging was earning the same respect that men get for doing the same things. Most of the time I felt that my knowledge and skills didn't carry the same weight so I began to look for other jobs where I would feel comfortable. I then worked as a car-wash attendant and at the same time would do small construction jobs around my community.

It's been two years now. I've been staying with a close friend who is also hustling to survive. So many of us out here are trying to live good lives, make opportunities. Whatever I earn, I share with her. I'm still in contact with my family back in the village. I'm living one day at a time.

# Determination is POWER

## Sainiana Tinai



My name is Sainiana Tinai. I was born in Lautoka hospital and I was brought up by my parents in Ba. I attended Ratu Rusiate Memorial school for my primary education and then Ba Methodist High School. The informal settlement that we lived in did not have access to power and water, we used a kerosene lamp and we drank from the well. There were six of us - five girls and a brother. Most of the time we were told that we wouldn't have anything to take for lunch to school. My father was the only one working (as a cleaner and messenger at Ba police station). Most of the time we walked to school. My mother told me to go home quickly after school and that she would have something good for me to eat. When I reached home, it would only be cassava (a root vegetable) and tea.

I attended high school but I couldn't finish it due to financial difficulties. Then I went to typing school but I couldn't finish this either due to financial problems. Then I joined the Red Cross to do voluntary services to build some experience in a workplace. I attended some training and workshops at Red Cross Fiji where I was able to gain certificates, jobs and voluntary attachments at government departments. With my first aid certificate I was recognized to apply for a job at the Emperor Gold Mine, to work as an Emergency Officer for employees, also called a Rescue Officer. During my service at the Emperor

Gold mine, I was transferred to a Pay Officer and Pay Mistress to employees.

Years went by and I met a man from Naitasiri. At that time I was being told that I can only become a permanent Pay Mistress if I get married. That was the way it was for women workers. So I had no other choice but to get married. Also I was blinded with love and planning to spend the rest of my life with him. We had two boys and we were living a happy life with our children until we found someone to care for our children since we were on the same shift. She lived in our home.

After 16 years of marriage my husband started not to take on his responsibility for bills and he started to change his shift to be with the babysitter when I was at work. When I suspected what they were doing I questioned him, arguments started and he started to physically abuse me. It was so toxic because he harassed and abused me in front of my children. He accused me of being jealous of the babysitter. But then later they couldn't hide their affair and they ran away together. Despite that I allow him to visit the children weekly. When he comes he creates more drama and he doesn't give any money for the children. I also had no choice but to look for another babysitter while I worked to feed, house and clothe us. I got separated from him



in 2006 and we divorced ten years later in 2016. The mine then closed. I was the last person into the job, so one of the first people to go out. Then I couldn't pay for my babysitter, bills started to pile up and our home went on mortgage. That's when I faced a lot of challenges financially. I did not have any choice but to take my children to my parents in Ba to look after them since my family is the only one I could trust.

I finally found work in Lautoka and my siblings looked after my children but when I came home I felt that my children were not properly taken care of. They were bullied by their older cousins in the home. Sometimes when I returned from work late in the evening I found my son still wearing his school uniform, and not showered and changed.

I dreamed of finding a place to stay with my children. I applied for the HART home in Ba and I was offered a house. When I went to stay there my parents didn't want to release my children so I sought police support. When we got into our home we did not have any household goods and at the same time I applied for social welfare to assist me with my children and our rent .

From there I joined the Hart home Women's Club, Ba Womens Forum and other NGOs and I started attending training and workshops. I continued to struggle but when I joined all these informal education I slowly started to come out of the box . I was inspired by things that I learnt and it empowered me to move things on my own - not depending on others.

Life was tough but I knew I needed to be even tougher. Today I am. I am thankful that I joined the DIVA Poverty to Power network. They assisted me with learning, networking, friendship, materials, and paints. The Ministry of Trade and Tourism assisted me with a sewing machine. I started to sew curtains and cushions and sell them in the market. Today my son has just joined the Fiji Police force and my other one is attending an Electrical Engineering course at FNU/Ba. I was able to support myself and my children with all the small businesses that I do from tailoring, selling flowers and making pickles and chutney. One important thing that I have learnt is that we can get out of poverty. TO do it we need to access help and support, and we need to continue to challenge this unbalanced system that is out there, in order to transform our lives.

# Hustle

## - Narieta Marama



My name is Eta. I am from the beautiful island of Taveuni with maternal links to Wayalevu, Yasawa. I was born in the small town of Labasa where my dad was an engineer and my mom was a market vendor. I was pretty fortunate at the time because I had everything a young girl wanted – an education and a dream of becoming a school teacher. I was the youngest of seven children and growing up with three brothers, I had the responsibility of doing everything in the house. My dad was one of the finest engineers at that time at the sugar mill. During my primary school years I stayed with my close relatives because their house was much closer to the school. The man in the household married to my relative was an alcoholic and almost every night he would return home drunk. I was around 9 years old and in the middle of the night or early morning he would sexually molest me. Sometimes I feel disgusted with myself at the abuse, not just angry at him. When he entered the house I would be awake and shivering with fear. I did not know what to do and I couldn't tell my relative because I knew it would break them up and also it would affect my education. He kept

on doing these disgusting acts until I moved to secondary level and moved to another school. It took time to recover and my healing process was painful. The more I tried to regain control, the more I ended up hurting myself. The impact was beyond physical injuries - I was scared, ashamed, and had unpleasant memories.

Despite joining the wrong crowds in school, I made my way to form 7. I was hoping to join the teaching training centre after secondary school. Then I got pregnant with my daughter. Again the world crumbled in front of me. They were so upset and when my father visited me at the hospital, he did not hold or kiss my daughter. At the end my daughter was registered under the Vola Ni Kawa Bula as their own and they looked after her. So I continued to live on my own and moved to Suva hoping to find a better life. I worked in different places but it was not stable and I continued to hustle and struggle trying to meet my life needs. I had a partner but things never worked out because I had to move back to Vanua Levu to look after my ill mother.



When my parents both passed away, I was alone with my daughter and I knew that I must really work to demonstrate my motherly role. I felt closer to her and we started to mend the gap between us. I knew I had to work for her education. Losing my parents and struggling with my daughter, I realised that my journey needed to be a lot different. The struggle was real because we were all on our own and poverty crept into our lives. I said to myself, "This is it. If I don't stand on my own feet and defeat this situation, we will definitely never get out." I am from a chiefly family so I had good access to land. I cultivated my piece of land and I challenged the men in the village that being a woman, we are also capable of doing what they do through sweat and hard work.

I was able to put my daughter into one of the famous schools in Taveuni, Bucalevu Secondary School. I put food on the table, and took her right through to tertiary education. I think that one of the greatest challenges in my life was the bylaws in the village. I was the only woman planting yaqona and dalo with the men. It was not well accepted. Working hard and having my daughter receive an education is one of the best solutions to poverty. Every now and then I remind my daughter not to follow in

my footsteps. When my daughter moved to higher education, we harvested our yaqona and crops and with that money she was able to complete her studies at FNU. I'm relieved and happy now to see how much she has grown and gained in life.

As for me, I continue to struggle. I move from place to place since I don't have anywhere to live. At the moment I'm in a safehouse in Lautoka and we have been doing a lot of vegetable farming lately. I am also the focal point for our DIVA hub in Lautoka. This role helps me to be occupied and at some point it has mellowed me. I am also learning a lot of new things especially when it comes to my personal development. I always remind myself that we are all different and have our own unique experiences. I think we need programs and policies that make food, water, housing, healthcare and education more affordable, and help to reduce poverty. Especially if they are designed for particular needs as women and children, not just men. Another important thing is to commit to climate change and climate justice solutions. Living in poverty is not an excuse nor only about personal issues - together we can tackle this issue through work for equity.

# My Journey

## - Meredani Tokainakoro



My name is Meredani Tokainakoro and I am from Naitasiri. There were seven children in my childhood home- 3 girls and four boys. As a family, we didn't have much and we lived a poor life. I only reached Class 5 because my dad was bedridden from a stroke. My mother asked my older sister and me to help her manage our family. After supporting my father for a few years, he passed away.

I was then sent to my uncle in Ba to be raised by him. I had a very difficult life, I was shunned and treated harshly by relatives. I wouldn't be allowed into their homes when I was hungry and they would chase me away. My mother would be in tears after seeing the way our own relatives treated me. I was then sent to Ba so I could experience a different type of life. But whatever treatment I had faced in the village, I faced also with my relatives and family in Ba.

I lived a very harsh life. I was neglected and

sometimes my clothes would be thrown out of the house. When we slept, my uncle's family would sleep on the bed and I would sleep on the cement floor - no mats or carpets to sleep on. That was the type of life I lived while growing up. Then one day I met a man from Naboubuco in Naitasiri and he invited me to go with him to his village for Christmas. My aunt got angry and didn't allow it. During these times of difficulties with my uncle and aunt, I prayed and asked God to change my circumstances and for me to live a better, stronger and a more successful life for my family and I. I again thought about that invitation from the man and I decided to just go.

So I met my husband and made the decision to get married when I was only 18 years old. I soon realised that life was very tough in the village. I then decided to change my own life, to work hard and to speak as if I was a man. I wanted to make decisions within the family. I did this and faced so many difficulties but I kept persevering and persisting with faith, up

until we moved to Nadi. When we reached Nadi, I thought back to all the things I went through – the harsh words, the treatment, sleeping on the cement floor, but now I was living in a town.

We then had a son. My husband was a market vendor, so I looked around for work to help support my family and pay rent and utility bills. We'd spread a mat on the floor of my husband's stall where our son would lay with his bottle of milk and baby items. I would then go to work as a caretaker for a Taiwanese man, cooking and housekeeping. I was concerned about setting a good example for my son, lessons he would learn from me and the type of life he would be exposed to. When my son was in Form 6 my husband passed away, and again I worried. I prayed about this - who was going to provide for us or pay for my son's fees? I then decided to return to the village farm as my contract with the Taiwanese family had also expired. I endured the heat on days I farmed. I planted eggplant, carried sacks of fertiliser and manure.

I then told my son to pray with me for opportunities to be financially stable. After a while, I met a man from Europe. We were introduced and I told him about the difficulties I was going through to support my son. He then told me that he owned a boat-building company in Yasawa and my son could work for him. I had a few doubts but I continued to pray for guidance. After talking with my son, he agreed to take up the offer. His father told him to pray and be strong in faith because his relatives were not going to care about us, but outsiders. My husband was right, from the day he passed until today, none of his family paid us a visit or a call.

Today I have a small business where I sell pies, scones and cakes for \$1 Fijian each and puddings for \$2 Fijian each, three days a week. I sell all my produce from my own home. I take orders from my neighbours the day before and they just pick it up from home when it's ready. I pay for the rent and utility bills and I support myself and help neighbours and other women with the money I've earned. I am very grateful to DIVA for Equality for allowing me to meet with the women in this network, teaching me useful lessons and raising my life to another standard. I am 65 years old now. I am very thankful to the women here and to the organisation for including me in this program on Poverty to Power.



# The tough road

- *Varanisee Gonewai*



My life was good when I was younger, and I did everything that children did. I played, I laughed, I ran around the yard with other kids who were of a similar age as me. Then at the age of 10, I was sexually molested by my elderly relative, and he told me not to tell anyone or he'd kill me. I was defenceless and I could not find a way away from him because he was bigger than me.

I started to hate myself because of what had happened. At the age of 15 I had a lot of peer pressure and I started following my friends. I skipped classes, stopped doing well in school, started doing drugs, smoking cigarettes and drinking. At the age of 19 I got married to my first husband with whom I had 3 children. I could not tell him what had happened to me as a child because I was in a very abusive relationship with him. We were living in a life of poverty. I went searching for something that would help me forget what had happened to me as

a child, but I could not find it. I started doing petty crime such as shoplifting, and I started going in and out of prison. Still, the pain did not leave me.

Then I met my second husband who was a humble and very good man, but his family did not like me. Despite this, we had 3 more children. Every time I was convicted and sent to prison, my mother-in-law would chase my 3 children from my previous marriage away from our home. They visited me in prison and told me what had happened to them. My heart ached.

One night, I couldn't sleep. I prayed to God to protect me and my 3 children and keep them safe. When I was released from prison, I met one of my friends. She introduced me to DIVA for Equality and it was a blessing. I started attending some workshops.

In the end DIVA and Habitat Fiji built a beautiful climate-proof small house for me and my children, built by women builders. It was a great experience.





I have started my own business and again with the support of DIVA. I'm just trying for this to be a big support to provide a brighter future for my children and break us free from poverty. I know that talking about all that happens to you in life is the right thing. It helps me. I've learned so much also from the workshops I've attended.

We don't have to be shamed or silent. Talk to each other in safe places about life problems. I monitor my children closely now because I don't want them

to go through the same problems as I did. Parents need to be careful all the time and pay attention to their children. More awareness on child abuse and parents must not be careless with their children. I feel like a new woman with a new vision. I am ready to tackle any situation. I'm just happy to be a part of DIVA for Equality and this space that helps me.

# My Painful Reality

## - Rusila Bakabaka



My name is Rusila Bakabaka. I am the second eldest in my family of six siblings, four men, two women. I was married to a man from Tavuki in Kadavu and we have three children together. I faced a lot of difficulties. I got to experience what it was like living in the outer islands in a village setting.

My husband would brutally beat me every now and then and I had no relatives to turn to, in that village. Most of the time when I was beaten up the rest of his relatives would just stare without helping. One night he came home with a mangrove stick and started to beat me and my back was covered with bruises. I went to the seawall and sat there,

contemplating what to do. I wanted to just jump out into the sea and swim into the deep waters for the big fishes to enjoy me as their meal. The thought of my children growing up without a mum held me back.

So one night when my husband abused me yet again, I decided that I needed to leave with the children. We walked from the village so many kilometres to Vunisea in the middle of the night. The youngest I carried on my back and the other one had to walk. I was also two months pregnant. There was a woman at Vunisea who managed the Suva ferry at that time. I had no other choice but to walk straight

to her house and ask her if she could help us get to Suva. I thank God that with no hesitation she got us into the ferry and gave us a room. She advised us not to go in and out of the room because my husband's relatives would see and stop us.

We reached Suva and travelled to Navosa, and after living with my brothers for a while, I realised that it would be better if I had my own house and lived on my own with my children. After a while, my eldest started school and at that time, I was also due at the Keasi Health Centre to have my second baby. Just 3 days after the birth I was discharged and I immediately went to harvest crops so that I could support my child's education. In the first school term, he wore flip flops and took a plastic bag as his school bag. We kept going.

From there, I started a small business and received help from social welfare. The money that I earned was not spent on me and my children most of the time because we were living under a relative's roof. Most of the time I would satisfy their needs before our own and it was hard. I'm so grateful that my mother was still alive and living in Nadi, so I would come down with my baby, sell vegetables at the market, and return to Navosa on Sunday. This was how I learnt to be self-sufficient and self-reliant to support my children. After some time, I went around Nadi looking for a house to rent. I found a place in Nawaka to rent for \$150 FJD a month and my children and I moved there. We used the same plastic plates that I used for my market produce to eat. Sometimes market sales were good and at other times, not so much, so we moved out of the flat because I could not afford it. We then lived at the Nadi market, spreading out cartons on the market floor to sleep and using public taps to bathe. Months passed and I became embarrassed because there were a lot of people from Navosa in Nadi and they would talk about me and my children. So I started looking for a place in Navakai and I found a flat to rent at \$220 FJD per month. I challenged myself to pay for it and also took in my niece and nephew from Navosa.

After a few months there, I got word of the Navakai Hart Home and I applied. I thank God that I am now in Ba HART and I have found out that I am not alone in my experiences. Whatever I have been through is similar to what women and people who now live in the Hart home experienced as well – people from

broken families, men and women who are single parents. From a harsh life in Kadavu, sleeping on the cement floors of the market, now I am grateful that God and my work picked me up from there. I work for Nadi Town Council and I am in charge of the Ladies Vendors Hostel which is situated above the very spot where I used to lay my children to sleep years before.

During COVID19 lockdown, a close relative of mine went into labour prematurely at 8 months and while the baby survived, she did not. I adopted the child and did everything I could to provide for her – feed her, clothe her and take her to the clinic. I was short of cash, so I would walk from the HART to the Health centre. I was raising and breastfeeding a 3 month old baby and a 3 week old at the same time. Often at times, when I would take them to the clinic, I would receive comments from strangers telling me I should have done family planning. I went on.

I'm grateful to live in the Ba HART home because I am of service, managing the home and also assisting people living with disabilities and the elderly. The CEO for the HART Homes has also asked me to continue my work, even though last year was supposed to have been my final year at the home. Through Sashi Kiran, I came to know about DIVA and I am very grateful to be a part of this organisation and their programs. I am grateful to DIVA, because from COVID19 until now, I have always received friendly support in terms of clothes, food and items for my children. I am thankful to have a husband from Naitasiri now, who is accepting and loving of my children, and to also have two more children with him. Now we have a small piece of land and we are slowly buying tin and timber to build a house. We go on.

# Never Been Easy

## - Alesi Tabuavou



My name is Alesi Tabuavou and I'm the president of Namulomulo Women's group in the province of Tailevu. I come from a family of 5 – 2 boys and 3 girls and I'm the youngest. Growing up my mother was the main breadwinner of the family since my father was sickly and couldn't stay with us. My mom was a dedicated woman who would push through all odds in order to keep the family running.

I completed high school and joined Coca Cola Amatil and worked there for 20 years. I was fortunate enough that through this work I was able to support my family needs. I had a son at the age of 30 and I was fortunate to have been working at that time and that I could support him during his school days. He has completed his studies and now has a job in New Zealand.

When I was working, I built a house in the village because I wanted to have my own space with my son. Unfortunately my mother fell ill and was completely bedridden and I had to look after her at home because there was no one else who I could trust. She is now 88 years old.

Living in the village without any main source of income, and as a main carer for an elder, has been a challenge. Sometimes I collect my produce and travel to Nausori Market to sell. Even at the market I don't earn much because the first deduction goes

to the payment of transportation of my goods. As soon as I reach home, I also have things lined up to be paid. Since we live in a communal society, most Vanua events and church activities require contributions and it takes away so many resources to benefit the family. Almost every week there are things that happen where we have to attend or contribute, which usually involve money. Most women and girls spend the majority of their time in finding family basic needs and care work that they don't spend time for themselves - to learn and adapt skills which will transform the way they are living.

Women need rest and their own time to learn and grow. They also need the government to take care of them if elderly, and support the carers. Due to knee pain, my mother cannot walk and crawls to get where she needs to go. I look after my mother and I try my best to improve my house for accessibility, like the toilet and the bathroom, for my mother and my family. I am part of my village club and we do screen printing, sewing, farming and selling food to help financially. I would like to thank DIVA for Equality for supporting and providing us with all that we need. I now run a canteen and sell grog at home to also support my family financially. I would like to encourage women to work together, love one another and fight against poverty.

# The unpaid Love

- *Anonymous*



As an indigenous iTaukei woman, living in the village was quite difficult because apart from taking care of the welfare of the family we needed to spend time and resources in village soqo and activities. My husband was working at a hotel in Denarau and the money that he earned is not enough to cater for the large family needs.

Seeing this, I started to make roti every morning as well as my housework and sat in front of the village by the roadside. Every day I would make at least 50 roti parcels to sell. This was a great help in supporting the payment of bills and food daily. This continued until my husband completed his term at the hotel.

It was also at the same time he was given the role as the Turaga ni Koro ( Village head man). My husband is a good man and not once has he raised his voice or been violent to me. So at this point I decided that it would be best to support him in his village role.

Everyday there was something happening at the village whether issues such as domestic violence, disputes or anything to do with village development or village visitation. So most of the time I was also there coordinating.

Whenever there was a village meeting in the village or an event it is a must that I should be the first one on site. I was usually picked on if I was late or not there. It was hard trying to balance my role as a mother and as a Radini Turaga ni Koro. Sometimes I would go without meals just to make sure every other thing is under good care.

At one stage I was diagnosed with diabetes and I had to go back to my village in Ra to rest properly. I stayed there for 6 months, then returned to my family and continued with my responsibilities of looking after my children and everyone. My husband receives \$210 Fijian after 3 months in his Turaga ni Koro role and this is barely enough to cater for the needs of my family.



# Hustling to Survive

## - Naomi Lasese



My name is Naomi Lasese and I'm the youngest, a single girl in a family of 8 boys. I was brought up in a very strict family and I was expected to follow all the house rules. My mum wanted to do the best for me, but I was the total opposite of a good, well behaved daughter. I left school at Form 4 level and wandered around following friends. At one stage in life I paused for a moment and I thought that it would be best to go back to school but it was too late because my parents have moved away from the idea of taking care of my education. So I would find myself seated at the Suva City Library reading books for hours and I would go there on a daily basis and the workers at the library got to know me well.

Years later I got married and had two children but my marriage didn't last because I was abused and mistreated by my husband. So I decided that it would be best for me to leave. A few years later I met a partner and I moved into his flat but never stopped hustling for my life.

I remember so well when it fully changed! It's not a choice to make, but a life to live when the world

comes crashing down. I was left with only a few clothes, a folding mat to sleep on, and my sulu to cover me like a blanket to sleep. I had no money in the bank because I was living day by day from the money I earned by selling food parcels. All this was taken from me by my ex-partner with whom I had lived for over 25 years. He eloped with his younger girlfriend to live elsewhere and I was told to vacate my flat in Martintar, Nadi.

I then met a gay friend renting a room in an informal settlement. He asked me to move in and split the rent which was \$150.00 Fiji per month. I moved in brokenhearted, and still in a messy situation. Later I moved to Ravarava settlement where I am still renting today. I live in a little shack house with electricity, bathroom and toilet shared with my landlord. It's a one bedroom house and it's quite peaceful. It is near to the river which is a mixture of fresh and saltwater. I go out most of the time to fish and make nice food to eat and the rest I sell to the neighbours or roadside.



Sometimes when there is nothing left in the cupboard I go around my community and ask the neighbours to give me some jobs doing laundry and cleaning up their compound to support me with food and rent. I was so used to living through poverty for decades that every time problems arise, I know how to deal with it.

I have learned to accept the fact that I'm living in poverty and at the same time I have begun to focus on what I really need, not my wants. Now as I reflect on my life I'm still standing because I have focused myself on what I can control in my own life. Most of the time I was trying to please others but to my dismay, all the things I had bought he claimed as his own.

It is my story to tell because I'm poor. To be honest I was a victim in a rejected relationship after so many years. Living in poverty is all to do with my mindset. Poverty in housing, hunger or emotion makes us all victims. But each individual person has a story to tell.

What I need is government assistance to house me. What I need is government assistance in rebuilding my Interests and my life.

What I need are counselling sessions.

What I need is aid for small business skills so that what I produce can be sold more, and better.

Living in poverty can be tackled but it cannot be demolished.

In medical science, a decomposed body means that only a skeleton is left. So it is when it comes to poverty, especially when it is deeply entrenched. It can have long-lasting effects on individuals and communities - much like how a skeleton remains long after the body has decomposed. **Poverty can trap generations in a cycle of deprivation and limit opportunities for improvement.**

# Living one day at a time

## - Miliame Loco



My mother gave birth to me at the age of 17 years old as a teenage mother, and ran away to Suva leaving me with my grandparents in Levuka. I was brought up by my grandparents in a church compound as my grandfather was the pastor of a Church. Since my grandfather was working for the church he couldn't build us a home since most of the time and resources he spent on evangelical gatherings. So we were financially unstable. I went to school with an empty stomach and on reaching home I accompanied my grandmother to the plantation or Mangrove swamps to find food.

I had a special friend in school who shared her lunch with me every day and we got so close. She was the only person I could share my stories with, until the time came when she just fell ill and died. I was shattered and scared because apart from my grandparents, she was my only hope. I knew that

I would never feel love again and no one would be there for me in school, so I just stopped going. My grandparents tried so hard to get me back to school but I had totally lost hope. I followed my grandparents around doing church activities and household chores.

When I reached my teenage years I started to join informal education around the communities. My grandfather was then transferred to Lomawai in Sigatoka to serve so we all left Levuka. During his term there there was a dispute amongst the church congregation and we were chased out of the church compound. We were told to vacate the compound within a week. It was the most painful experience because we had no money and nowhere to go. We ended up housing ourselves in the bush, just a shelter, no bathroom, no water, no electricity and no food. It broke my heart to see my grandparents



suffer after they have invested so much time and resources in the church welfare and what they got in return was this slap in the face.

We slept underneath a blue tarpaulin with 4 posts and from there I knew I had to do something. From my little understanding in English I asked a friend if he could help me enrol in Swimming Instructor courses. I was so fortunate that I was able to attend this course for free, and later I obtained a certificate as a Swimming instructor. I did other courses of First Aid at Fiji Red Cross because it was one of the important requirements in order to find a job in this area of work. Later on I was able to find employment in some of the private schools in Lautoka and also teach swimming classes to some mainstream Primary schools. Coincidentally an Indo-Fijian man saw how much we were struggling to make a living in those bushes so he temporarily gave my grandfather a piece of land to build our house and to farm. That was a breath of fresh air to our family so we started to rebuild our lives again from nothing.

After a few years of working I met a man whom I thought would take care of me, he ended up leaving me behind with a child. No one was there to look after my child and it was also at that time my grandparents health was deteriorating. Before my grandparents passed away they took me and my child to my mum and for the very first time I had to live under my mothers roof. My mum also has her family to look after, so me and my child were an extra burden in the house. Without steady employment I did odd jobs around the community to look after my child who was just 2 years old. Living each day with an empty stomach was nothing new to me but I had to make sure that my child was eating properly. Two years later I got married to an Indian man and I moved into his home. I couldn't leave my child behind with my relatives. I had to take him along. His family was not welcoming to my child so we were told to move out .

My husband extended his family home from some left over iron so it is just enough for us to shelter. During rainy weather I move my children around to dry spots in the house. To make matters worse, our neighbour's sewage always overflows into our house when it rains. Till today reports have been

made to local authorities but no changes have been made. We survive by collecting cans in the streets of Nadi and Lautoka and we take it in for recycling at the factory. We woke up early in the morning around 5am and by 7am we were usually walking on the main roads with our trolley of cans. My husband would be the one who does a lot of walking and I would be stationed at public bus stops or trees with my children. Sometimes we only have a water bottle to keep us going through the day. We learnt to survive one day at a time and it has been so hard living around the streets during the day with my 3 children. If there was a lot of picking during the week we could earn around \$150 FJD by the end of the week which is just enough to keep us living. If it was not a good week, nothing.

One night while we were returning home with our sack of cans, we got off at the main road since we were travelling in the public bus. Not all the bus companies that operate from Nadi to Lautoka accommodate our sacks of cans so we always wait for the right one that usually departs from Nadi around 6.30pm. That night we got off at our main road and while my husband was trying to manage our cans and I was trying to take our trolleys out, a police vehicle who wanted to take a pass on the wrong side of the road came up right behind us with his lights turned off. He bumped my second son and he did not even step outside to check on him. The case was reported to the Police but then it seems to be swept under the carpet. Is it because we are poor? Until now nothing has been done for us, and my son is living with his disabilities at home. My son can't move around much. His leg does not move at all. That night was one of the saddest nights in my life. I asked God, Why? When I got home I broke down in tears and cried for the whole night. We had no money to go back and forth to the hospital or even the police station to follow up on the case. From then on, my husband goes out and collects cans and I stay home with the children. Sometimes our cupboard is empty but I make sure that whatever is left, even rice only or dhal, my children will eat.

I still have hopes for a bright future, especially for my children. I want to go back to school to continue my teaching but at the moment I'm still just trying every day to survive.

# Learning to dance in the rain - *Katia Cakacaka*



Bula Vinaka. I am from the beautiful Island of Ono-i-Lau. There were six of us in the family and since my father worked at the Health Department he was stationed in Matuku Island. That was where we were brought up. I wanted to be a businesswoman when I was growing up because that was what mum and dad did when we were struggling. They operated a business back in the Island and that was one of our sources of income for a proper education. Before mum and dad started the small business it was really hard growing up on the island. Dad didn't receive his wages via bank as there was none on the island. So he needed to travel to Suva to withdraw but the boat fare was so expensive that he couldn't travel often to pick it up.

We struggled a lot since there were six of us needing school. Black Tea and Cassava was a normal menu

item. Whatever money mum received she made sure that we had flour, sugar, rice and oil in the cupboard. For the rest of the food to go with it, she went fishing or got vegetables from the plantation. My parents wanted all of us to continue with our secondary school in Suva and they thought that putting us in a boarding school would be best. Poverty hit harder during this time as we started to move one by one to Suva. I saw how much they were struggling to put us into the boarding school so when it was my turn to continue my studies in Suva I opted to stay with a relative in Vatuwaqa so that it could ease their burden.

Going through this experience was a big challenge as I tried to navigate my way through. I had to walk most of the time back home from school, since I was not given enough cash and I would be fed nicely

only if mum and dad sent food rations on time. I would stay back in school all afternoon to complete my homework because I was not allowed to switch on the lights at my relative's place.

While I was in Suva my parents thought that it would be best if they all came to Suva so we could all stay together. By that time I was just finishing secondary school. My parents were offered land on the Western side by a friend so we moved. I finished my secondary school Studies and I started to run a small business. I moved back to the village where I established my business of buying handcrafts and reselling them to the vendors in Suva. Later on I moved back to school and ran a stall at the Nadi Handicrafts flea market. With the money that I earned I was able to buy a house on mortgage which was cheap at that time.

Everything was working well for me until I got married to a man. His village was just 20 minutes away from Nausori Town. I moved in with him and we stayed with his family. His father who was the leader in the village was not happy with me being a businesswoman. He told me to close the business because if we have too much money we will spoil our relationship in the village.

In the village I saw that women were not treated well so I formed a women's group in the village involving the women in informal workshops. The women's group was running well and I was able to bring in a funder who financed a few of our income generating activities. My father in law felt intimidated by my presence and work so he began to mistreat me. Sometimes he would chase us out of the house and we would go and stay with relatives. That continued for a while and I thought that it would be best to build our own house.

I sold my house in Suva and with that money I built a house for me and my husband on his land just beside the main village. Soon after the house was built my husband started to mistreat me. Since I was not able to have children he would call me a useless wife in front of his relatives. Sometimes when I was with the women in the village he would just swear at me calling our names. He would say to me "Vakalusi Tavioka" ( Wasting cassava) that is a phrase commonly used to shame women who do not bear any children.

Everything changed in our home, my husband mocked me for everything. One day I began to feel ill and I had to go to see the doctor. I felt so helpless when the doctor informed me that I was diagnosed with stage 5 breast cancer. I waited for a while trying to grasp everything, then one night I told my husband. I thought my sickness would change him and he would take care of me but it was the total opposite. He got angry when I told him that one of my breasts will be removed for good. He did not accept the fact that I will be living my life with one breast only.

He left that same day and eloped with another woman that he was seeing. I was devastated. I felt betrayed and lost. I was with him through thick and thin and this was what I got in return. I left the village days after that and made my way to Nadi to my family. I had surgery and I felt I had lost my femininity. I told myself that this is just another phase in life. I wiped my tears and I prayed and thanked God for everything. My God was there all along. Luckily my brother was supportive and gave me a room in his house. My second breast is also affected and the doctors are monitoring it carefully. Sometimes I miss my breasts, they were part of me. I never dreamed I'd lose them to cancer but it happened.

# Light at the end of every tunnel - Luisa Uluirewa



My name is Luisa Marama Uluirewa and I am from Tailevu. I was born and bred in Samabula. My mother got married when she was only 18 while my father was 39. Their plans for our family were slow because my dad was older when I had started school, and life was difficult. There were seven of us in the family - two girls and five boys - we were older than the other siblings.

When I was growing up my parents were clergies for the Church. I used to sing at the Sunday school and youth choir in my younger days. Due to the difficulties I decided to leave school after Class 8 to help my parents support my younger siblings. My dad had also retired from his job at that time and my mother was sickly and there was no cure. I started working when I was 14 years old. I earned \$1 FJD an hour – that was \$8 per day, \$42 FJD a week. With this small amount of money I supported my family and paid for siblings' school fees of \$120 FJD per term.

I was the stronger one of the girls, my older sister did not enjoy work. She was my dad's favourite child and whatever she wanted was done for her. I took on roles of both boy and girl in my family from a very young age. When my dad turned 55yo he took me to all the places he was contracted. He worked for the Public Works Department, and when he retired, he became a private contractor – building houses, plumbing works or any other work. He would take me with him and teach me technical skills when I was 14yo until I was 19yo. When I was 16, I also started working for a garment factory where I cut thread from clothes.

I never felt discouraged because I was determined to support my brothers as I wanted at least one of them to succeed academically. At a point in my life, I decided to have a partner and I didn't tell my family about him until I got pregnant. I told my parents the news but they didn't accept it because life was already difficult at home. I was the only one working. Still, my partner stayed at home with me and we had our child. Four months later, my family



members beat him up while he was sleeping and chased him from home because they didn't like that he was a smoker and also would come home whenever he felt like it. Despite all the things that they said about him, I still had feelings for him and I waited for him to return. A year passed and he still hadn't come back, so I slowly started moving away from home to find a life for myself.

I left home when I was 21 years old, mostly because there was no one to help me look after my child. I left my baby with my mother and I went to look for work. I ended up working at a car wash and I supported my daughter. Never once did I forget about her during those times. After about two years, I started playing rugby. My friends would invite me to games and I'd go. At this point, all the lessons that I had learned while growing up in a Christian home were gone. I was hurt because of what my family had done to my relationship and partner so I coped by playing rugby and picking up new things from friends - whatever made them happy, made me happy.

After I had spent a few years away from home, I thought about returning because I felt that the problems I previously had with my family would have healed with time. I returned home with a same-sex partner and the treatment from my family was worse than before. I struggled even more than I did when I last saw them and it was a very difficult time for me. They told me that I was an irresponsible mother for leaving my daughter with them, going away to enjoy my life and then bringing

a woman home.

What they didn't realise was that I had gained so many useful skills and that I had sacrificed a lot to support them. I had a conversation with my partner and I told her that I just wanted to live with my children and to have our own house because I didn't want my family to control us. I was capable of doing all these things- I had the skills to build my own house. One day we received an invitation from my father. He asked us to send him some money for a function in the village and to attend it with him. What I did not know was that my brothers had already plotted to beat up my partner when we got to the village. They chased her away and told her to never see me again. A relative told me what my family had done and I immediately went looking for her, but she was able to find a transport from the village and returned to Suva, never contacting me again. From that time until now, I didn't want anything else to do with my family.

Lesbians and bisexual women continue to face discrimination. Over the years politicians have used the slogan, 'Leave no one behind' especially when it comes to LGBTQI people. However, we are repeatedly left behind which is unacceptable.

**Please, keep your promises. Please, make sure that the challenges that we face are accounted for, in your responses.**

***(Postscript : Luisa and partner now run a 24 hour, 7 day carwash business in Suva from late 2023, 'My Gang's Car Wash'. Please Support!)***

# Being Positive is the key- *Manjula Ram*

My name is Manjula Ram and I'm 60 years old. I had five other siblings while I was growing up. My dad was a construction worker and the only wage earner. At that time living



expenses were cheaper but there are many other factors that made life too expensive. There were days with nothing else in the cupboard and my mother had to look for food to support us. There was never a decent meal because we would just eat what is available and affordable.

With my parents' hard work I was able to reach Form 6, then worked as an accountant. Then I got married at the age of 19 years old and had 4 children. My husband was a skillful technician. We were able to rent a space in Nausori Town to start up our business and it was all going really well. My children were still small and I would just go in and out of the shop to support him. We were living a very good life with good food until my husband had to go through an operation that made him bedridden.

We couldn't afford to operate the business any further and closed it down. The experience of losing something so important to us was terrible. That was the downfall of our lives. We struggled to make it through day by day. We were renting and one of my relatives offered his old shed for us to stay in. The shed was torn at some corners but we had no choice but to make use of the resources around us. I have lost count of the days when the cupboard stored nothing. It was so hard. I had to look after my 4 children and a bedridden husband. In the middle of the night when everyone is sleeping I would be up just thinking about what I could prepare for my kids to eat. I felt like I was being punished and in most cases I felt like giving up. At one point I fed them porridge for dinner and I just added salt because there was no sugar.

So I decided to find work when my youngest child was only 4 months old. I remember getting \$50 Fiji each week so I had a very tight budget with 4 children and a husband to feed. Most moments I was trying to hide baby milk stains on my dress and I would pack tissues or napkins in my bra. Life was hard and I knew the better life of my children and my husband was placed in my hands so I had to do something to change things.

My older brother was very helpful and supported us when he got any extra money so that was always a relief when he did that because I would be able to save a dollar or two. So later on my small savings we were able to buy video tapes and we would rent them around the community. At the same time my husband was able to recover some use of his hands so we set up a table from home and he could do small technical jobs from there for community members.

This went on until I was able to get all my children through school and into higher education. We were also lucky enough to move into our family house which my elder brother had been occupying. He migrated to America with his family and he asked me to move in and take care of the family house. I never give up and until today I'm still looking after my bedridden husband and it's been 9 years.

With the support of DIVA for Equality I managed to start up a small business selling Indian sweets in my community. Whatever money I raised, I used for the bills and food at home. All my children are working and they are my biggest supporters at home.

Poverty is real and it is here in my home for so long. Poverty has made me lose hope in life so many times. It has taken me to places that I have never thought I would be. One thing that I learnt from my experiences of poverty is that you should always remain positive. Be willing to ask for assistance from people who can help. Living in poverty prevents us from so many things in life but I believe with a positive mindset we will be able to drive through it and look beyond the spells of poverty.

# Rising from Poverty

- *Sereima Damuni*



As Nelson Mandela said, “As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality exists in our world, none of us can truly rest.” As a lesbian single mother, poverty is tripled when there are two or more mouths to feed, both if I am unemployed - or working but the pay rate is low. It is so hard. So in my opinion, it is important that when a person is living in an extended or a large family, that you negotiate or share the load of who pays the bills, who buys food and other necessities for the family. If this is not done, then poverty exists almost every day, and this is what I go through at home. As we know, the cause of poverty is bad early-life conditions and poor education, which leads to unemployment. This leads to poor living conditions, and gender and other inequality. We see unequal pay between women and men who work in the same institutions because of patriarchy. We need to change all this to really bring an end to poverty. I believe the system itself is partly the problem so the change needs to begin with us where we use our skills and knowledge to overcome poverty.

Positive change is happening around us. On TV and radio we hear about young women in sports, especially in rugby who are selected to represent our country, play overseas and be paid allowances. Many young women are also recruited for state

services like the Navy, Police and Fire Authority, Prison Wardens and Military. These are steady jobs for them. Other young women are now builders, starting businesses, etc.

We cannot just keep speaking about the problems. It’s time to act. I urge LGBTI friends not to sit back and relax. Don’t be people who give up easily, instead use the hurdles before you to make you stronger. Rise and act. Tap into free government and NGO initiatives because when one door closes another opens. There is still room for improvement from the government and other NGOs to empower women. From my experience, our God given talent and skills can also help us come out of this poverty.

I am now running a small massage business that is helping me pay the bills. I also recently enrolled myself in a recognised aged care course with the hope of up-skilling and getting certified, then using that to further boost my work prospects. I am always hustling, for example I also cut hair for a fee thanks to Shirley Tagi for a pair of clippers she gave me. It may not sound like much but this has been helping me get by and more. Last but not least I thank DIVA and crew, especially Noelene Nabulivou for always reaching out and supporting me and everyone in every way. We are rising from poverty to power.

# The Will to Overcome Poverty - *Penina Tusoya*

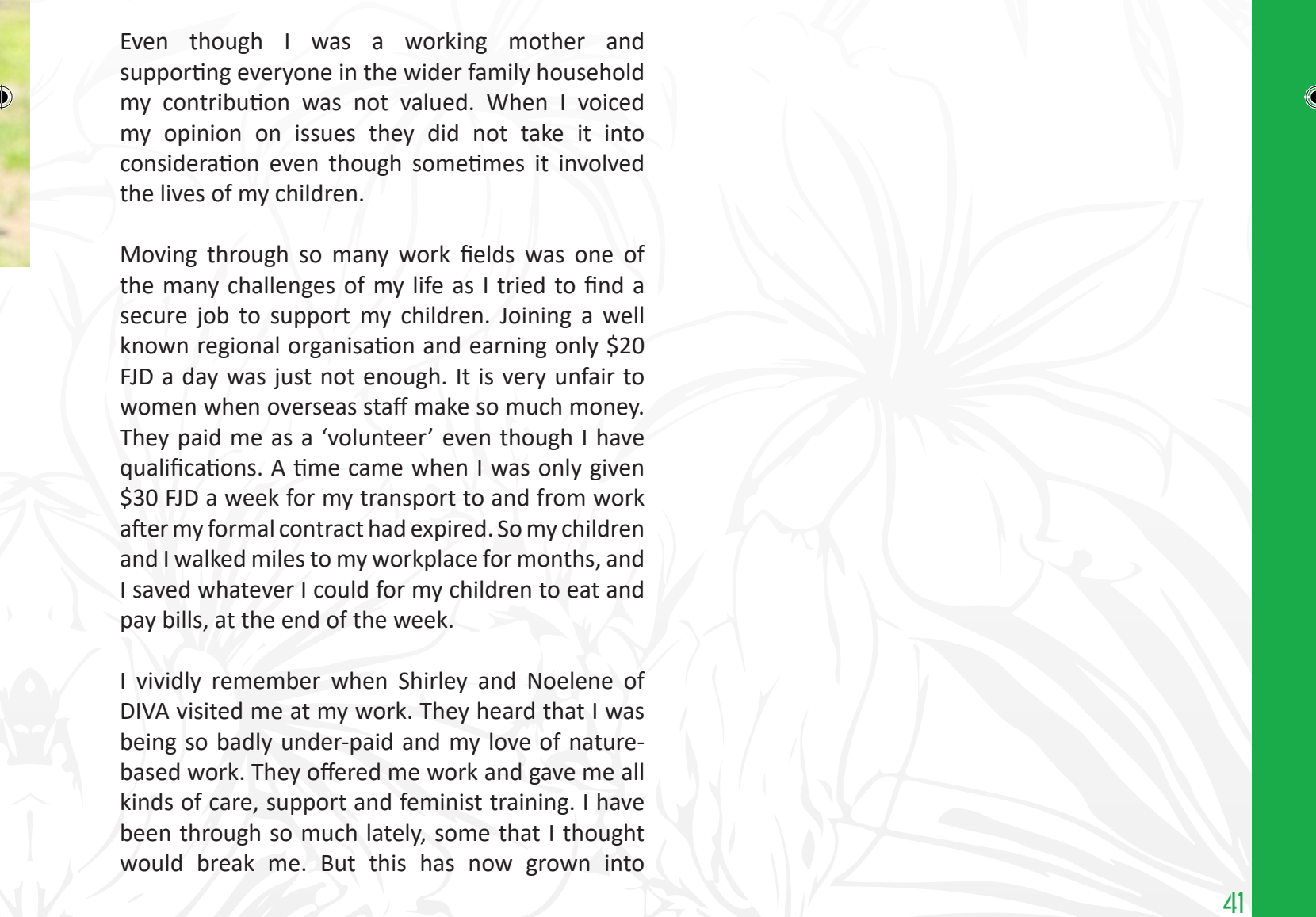




My name is Penina Tusoya and my colleagues and friends call me Pejo. I grew up with my single mother and brother and it was so challenging. My mother was a strong woman who planted our food, went out fishing on a daily basis and worked hard to give us a better life.

Her dreams shattered when she was diagnosed with cervical cancer while still young. She had no choice but to give away her two beloved children to her brother and his family to continue supporting and raising them. It was heartbreaking to see the most greatest woman in my life fade away as she lay on her deathbed. It was difficult as so many thoughts crept into my mind as a 7 year old child. Who would support us with our education? Most importantly I lost the only person who I knew will be there for us through thick and thin.

Life was very hard and got even worse the year after my mother died. There was no support and we could not continue our education because there was not enough money to pay for our school fees. Sometimes we would go to school without meals and I would eat from my friend's lunchbox. My brother and I made and sold reed brooms and other small items to pay our fees. Sometimes I will only fill my stomach with water to go through the day but I never lose hope on achieving something at the end of the year. This tough life continued until we reached tertiary education, there was a lack of support from our families and my young brother and I supported each other to get through. Sometimes, I walked miles from Caubati to USP Laucala Campus to attend classes and return home. It wasn't until I got my first job that I became financially stable. Poverty crept in again when I got married. Living in a house without water, electricity and a proper toilet





was not easy. The roof of the house was always leaking and whenever there was rain, the water burst into the house. I would move our belongings from corner to corner and find another dry spot to cook and keep my children warm. I managed to save enough money and replace the roofing iron. Having children was another burden to carry on my shoulders because I had to clothe and feed my babies. Their father did not fully support us and I was left to do everything by myself. I stayed with my mother-in-law, sister in law and her own family. They were also not working and the little money that I earned had to support them too. Living in poverty was already a system for me, so I made myself ready to tackle every problem that came my way.

Even though I was a working mother and supporting everyone in the wider family household my contribution was not valued. When I voiced my opinion on issues they did not take it into consideration even though sometimes it involved the lives of my children.

Moving through so many work fields was one of the many challenges of my life as I tried to find a secure job to support my children. Joining a well known regional organisation and earning only \$20 FJD a day was just not enough. It is very unfair to women when overseas staff make so much money. They paid me as a 'volunteer' even though I have qualifications. A time came when I was only given \$30 FJD a week for my transport to and from work after my formal contract had expired. So my children and I walked miles to my workplace for months, and I saved whatever I could for my children to eat and pay bills, at the end of the week.

I vividly remember when Shirley and Noelene of DIVA visited me at my work. They heard that I was being so badly under-paid and my love of nature-based work. They offered me work and gave me all kinds of care, support and feminist training. I have been through so much lately, some that I thought would break me. But this has now grown into

full time work looking after the DIVA Community Centre and garden, and focusing on women-led agroecology and other DIVA projects. Now I earn a living wage and I am in a safe and caring workplace. The will to overcome poverty is in all of us – our mindset, willpower. We want to be independent, strong Fijian women who can stand up and provide ourselves with every little thing we need. But we need support to make it.

I really like the quote by Audre Lorde, who said, "I am not free while every woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own."

## The essence of life is the Power of sharing Love- *Naomi Vuni*



My name is Naomi Vuni and I'm the secretary of Tailevu South Disabled Association. I was brought up by my single mother with 3 other brothers in a village in Tailevu. I acquired my disability when I was 5 years old from an uncle who came back from drinking grog and accidentally stepped on my legs while I was sleeping. That night my life changed forever.

Growing up as a child with a disability was very hard as people would call me names like, "Naomi na Yava Qelo". It was so hard to hear those harsh words over and over again and to make the matter worse, we were living in poverty in an extended family. Our relatives would gossip about us if my mum did not contribute enough food on the table. In the village they would talk if we did not contribute to any soli or gathering. I lost confidence in myself, I was denied opportunities and treated badly because of my disability.

My mum couldn't afford to pay for my education so I had to stay home and help with house chores. So one day I got so tired of living life in this tough, very complex environment so I thought that getting married would change my life. I met a man and we had two boys together and still poverty was right under my nose. I would go without meals just to send both of my sons to school. If one of my boys got sick I usually didn't have the money to take them to the hospital and I would just give them herbal medicine around our compound.

We live in a shack house. The only room in the house was without a floor and we could see right through to the ground. My husband passed away two years ago leaving us with nothing even though he was the turaga-ni-koro of one of the prominent villages where all their land has been leased for businesses. At the heart of poverty I continued to do my work as a volunteer on the ground, visiting the members in our network with a disability, because I feel that if we continue to help each other build our dreams and be together, we can achieve much more.

My eldest son, who just turned 19 when my husband passed away, brought a girl into our house and then chased me away. He told me that I was of no use since his dad was not here anymore. At that time I was just trying to start a business cutting grass around the neighbours houses. My son sold off the brush cutter and I was left without a dollar. I moved from house to house searching for a place to live freely.

DIVA for Equality helped me to start a grog business and during that time I lived with my mum and elder brother in the village. My brother used the money and has not repaid a cent, till today. I was then again left with nothing. I'm struggling to cope but one thing that keeps me going is the advocacy and grassroots organising that I am doing on the ground. I always feel that even if you are mistreated you don't have to repeat that treatment to others.

# We rise by lifting others

## - Savena Devi



I am Savena Devi, originally from Ba but married in Rakiraki. I'm a widow and I've got 3 beautiful children- 2 daughters and a son. My eldest daughter is a homemaker and married with a child, and my son is a mechanical engineer and fitter machinist. My youngest daughter is doing her apprenticeship. I've been with DIVA for more than 4 years and I've learned so much that has helped me do awareness programs on Poverty to Power in my own community and the women's club in Rakiraki. When I ask them what they understand about poverty, the first thing they usually say is that poverty is a lack of money. My reply is that money matters, but there are other factors that we need to take into consideration. We must know that foods should be healthy- fresh vegetables and fruits. We need fresh local food. We also need clean water, good medical services, education, transport, employment, climate justice and our human rights.

I also tell them that if we all live on a poverty line, then we have to help each other - that is togetherness. Some women are self employed, others work to get food on the table by selling doormats, food, juice, running canteens, making pickles, chutney and sweets. Many are market vendors.

I have found out that the best way to overcome poverty is gardening – backyard and home vegetable planting. Home grown vegetables are fresher than vegetables that we buy from the markets. For

homegrown vegetation we can use homemade, organic insecticides. These are moringa/saijan and neem leaves soaked for 3-4 days in an airtight container and then opened in the garden. It repels insects. You can also dilute it and spray it on the vegetables.

Don't buy manure or fertilisers from the shop. Just use natural manures like cow, goat and chicken dung and compost waste. For every problem, there is a safe, good solution, but we have to work for it and use it. We need to be resourceful, creative and self reliant to overcome poverty.

I also suggest for women to make herbal medicines and organic drinks. There are many resources around us but we are not using it – basil, fenugreek, lemon tea, green tea, mile-a-minute, cowpea leaves – chew a leaf in the morning after brushing, do this twice a week and it can lower your sugar levels; no need to take tablets and run to the hospital all the time. We don't really know what chemicals are added to the medicine we get from the chemists, you might get side effects from it. Using natural medicine, there are less side effects. There are many more herbs and plants that we can use for our health. Instead of buying fruits we can grow our own fruits which will be fresher.

To overcome poverty, a change is needed that will be followed by the people of Fiji. Many of us can live through poverty but we can be transformed

to having power in ourselves. I think we need to start from childhood, not when we're older. We can teach our children financial literacy and savings and teach them to budget – we use a part of their school spending and save the rest. Help them make this a habit and understand the importance of money and saving. Engage people in local community activities to make use of the resources around them, gardening, farming – poultry, vegetables, crop and fruits, include people in organic awareness campaigns, form groups or clubs to help community members, and all these can change things to some extent.

If I can change, others can change. I've worked alongside a lot of women in Rakiraki on empowerment work. I receive good feedback from

them, especially in the progress of their gardens, farms and the organic fertiliser or insecticides they have used. I keep going.

As a grassroots woman leader we really need to know what our community needs and we should not work in silos. We can have the confidence to speak out. In May 2023 I met Shamina Ali at the 3rd Pacific feminist Forum when I was there with DIVA. I lobbied for FWCC to reopen the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre in Rakiraki and I am so happy that she heard our plea. By August the Rakiraki Centre reopened for women in the Rakiraki community. I'm very proud to be a part of DIVA and my children are also proud. Through DIVA, I'm so proud that that is the evidence of what I've learned - that is about WOMEN'S POWER.



# She remembered who she was and the game changed

## - Frances Tawake



While we were growing up I had eight siblings and I was the second youngest in the family. My dad didn't earn much and my mum used to work as a housegirl. At one point in our lives we were all schooling from primary to tertiary levels. I vividly remember a pencil was cut into 3 pieces and shared. Yes, rice and black tea was never a miss in a day, always shared with love.

Our home welcomed everyone, even though we didn't have much. Relatives stayed with us for studies in Suva, and others came for work. My mom, always eager to help, warmly welcomed them. However, I noticed something troubling - her kindness was sometimes taken for granted. Despite that, she persisted in accommodating everyone, believing it was her duty.

Our family was tightly bonded by our faith, and attending church on Friday evenings and Sundays was a must for everyone. Everything changed one Friday evening when I took the lead home after church without knowing that fate had something unexpected in store for me.

I was sexually molested by one of our close relatives when I arrived home that evening. I was only 10 years old and he threatened me, not to tell anyone. I never did until now as I'm writing my story. It was an unspoken agony, the pain inside like a hidden wound, buried deep and throbbing. It stayed unseen

as I finished high school and entered College. That's when it began to surface, and I realised the truth in the saying: it only takes a few wrong decisions to bring out the darkness within. Boom! I started to let go of my pain through the beauty of the world. One night, I stayed at my friend's house. When I got home the next morning I was grounded and I didn't get a chance to finish my tertiary education. Back then, they didn't realise that this decision would have a lasting impact on my life.

I spent one to two years at home, supporting my mother through the chaos that life had thrown at us. During that time, I filled my days with simple joys, spending time on leisure activities and attending any informal workshops that came my way. Somehow, I managed to rebuild myself. Eventually, I found a job at a feminist organisation. This marked a profound shift in my life. Working there, I began to unravel, understand and reshape my perceptions about the challenges women face. The stories of the women I encountered fueled a fire within me. It hit me hard – I had often taken life for granted. Now, with newfound grassroots activism I was always driven to make a difference.

Just when I was blossoming I decided to get married in 2014. That was a complete turn again and everything was not working well for me. My husband was a very typical Fijian man and it was a challenge for him to understand the work that I

do. I was abused in a few cases and even told by his family members that I was of no value since I can't give them a child. The famous Fijian saying of diminishing women who can't bear children : "Vakalusi Tavioka" even though I was buying my own 'tavioka' actually, and I was feeding and paying bills for the whole family. That did not dampen my spirit as I continued to work my way through life. At the moment I have two beautiful children and I'm trying my very best to give them the life that they deserve and also at the same time hoping that the world that I'm breeding them into, will make a brighter and safer environment for them and all the other children.

Joining DIVA for Equality in 2020 was another level of broadening my knowledge and my passion in working with the women and the marginalised

community especially when it comes to LGBTQ issues. The unfortunate reality of the gaps in inclusive development and unfair differences persist. They hit women and our marginalised groups the hardest. Even though there's been some progress, things like unequal power, traditional structures, unfair ideas about gender and societal expectations still shape how development happens, making it harder for some to get ahead with our lives. The deeply ingrained gender roles and norms limit the opportunities available to everyone and this needs to change. Real progress isn't just about making more money. It's about making sure everyone, no matter where they come from, can have a good life. It's about giving people the chance to do well, help others, and live with respect and dignity.



# Breaking the chain of Poverty - *Kalisita Ralase*



My name is Kalisita. I am known as Bui at home and in my community. My husband is from Lau and we have 5 children and 10 grandchildren. While growing up I was my mum's helper in the house so I had to take care of my siblings and the house whenever she was at work. My father was a seasonal worker at the sugar mill, and he only worked for 6 months per year. My parents struggled a lot to keep the family going. I remember when I was 10 years old and my mother started work at the Lautoka hospital as a maid. \$13 FJD a week was a lot of money for us. She contributed so much to my life. Mum was so dedicated and involved in a lot of unpaid care work in the community. Most families relied on her to help them with certain things and she was like a saviour to everyone because of her good heart and hard work. Even though my parents didn't earn much we always looked forward to payday. We would wait for our father to come home with two or three loaves of bread and tin fish for dinner and that was special.

My primary education was a memorable time of my life. When I was in class 7, two of my sisters started boarding school and since both of my parents were working I had to manage care for my other two smaller siblings, one in class 5 and the other in class 3. I prepared their breakfast and lunch and did the housework after school. I left school when I was in form 4 due to financial difficulties and by 18 years old I got married.

My marriage life was such a struggle since I had children to take care of. I learned how to sew from a very young age and this came in handy when we were struggling to survive with my children's

needs. Through sewing and hard work we managed to send our children to better education. I did not want history to repeat itself for my children and for them to face what I went through in life.

Today my children have a good life with their families and have children of their own. I also dedicate my time in the women's group in my community and spend most time in church. In my community most women are left idle late in life, without any goals in life. Some of them have good education but they are now without work and support.

Women's work is never done in any community. One thing in common for these women is that they are so much engaged in unpaid care work. Women are seen as carers and nurturers in the community. We are the first to respond to anything that happens and we are the first blamed when something goes wrong.

Women face a lot of challenges in the community that make it hard to live life as we choose. Even though we work so hard all our lives.

Women don't know our rights and are not well informed of what to do when someone harms us. Women need the right tools and resources so that we can change our lives.

Women need our families, society and Government to recognise the work that we do all our lives for everyone else. Make good policies that take care of us. All the time but especially when we get old.

# Better Now than Never

## - Viva Tatawaqa



For a very long time I used to believe that some of us were just born to struggle more than others. This played a big role in how I carried myself in communities or within my nuclear and extended family. Growing up, I saw that people that seem to struggle more are never prioritised to be helped, but they are the ones that are expected to do a lot of physical work or communal work for society. The sad reality is that regardless that some families face discrimination in communities for being poorer or not contributing enough, the more fortunate households or communities keep getting prioritised in terms of development or assistance.

Many grow up being oppressed and not finding the confidence to even question how things are done unfairly. Because you don't have enough, you do as you are told. You agree with everything that's been proposed by the privileged ones and you don't have the power or authority to question things. You just need to be grateful for being in spaces where decisions have been made and discussions have been taking place. But not supposed to speak or

share your thoughts.

We give power to others even without knowing we have, just because we come from a family that is seen as high poverty, or maybe from a family where your father is looked at as an alcoholic, or with a grandfather who never owned anything and worked as a caretaker all their lives. So you grow up to live a life built on others' perception of how you should be, not what you really can be.

I have been through times in my life where pawn shop owners were more like family and money lenders were not my favourite people to bump into in public spaces. Hustling was never enough even though I tried to be on top of my game in making sure I was financially stable. What I found out after some time, was that my hustling was never gonna be fruitful.

Why? Because at the same time as I was trying to stabilise myself financially, I was also trying to make people accept me fully as who I wish to be - a free and outspoken I-taukei young woman with



a diverse sexual orientation that deserves as much love as any human being. Trying not to play a saviour in everyone's life is a lesson I had to learn the hard way, pushing back more on any family or loved ones when you know you can't help, is something I have to mentally and physically practise all the time. So that I can be looked at as a person, not an ATM machine.

The work in eradicating poverty is the work that we do everyday. It's just the approach and the beneficiaries that is different sometimes. Some work for personal gain and benefits, other people work for others, still others disrupt the systems so that it is more inclusive and just. Many become gatekeepers in this unfair system that serve certain people but keep suppressing others. So much of this happens in quiet and unnoticed ways, e.g Information and consultation about national benefits only come in certain languages, or they are available only around areas where it's easy to access because of better infrastructure. As an example, first time house owner benefit applications and criteria are written up in ways that most needy communities don't even understand, much less find the information. Also expectations of having a certain amount as a down-payment as if everyone has a good and stable job to be able to save for that amount, as if poor people don't deserve housing. As usual these call outs are only available for weeks and it is closed again. How

can someone living in a squatters settlement in Gaji (Suva, the capital of Fiji) be able to save enough money within weeks to have a fixed deposit when you share such information within a month of the closing date? This is just an example of many more such benefits that are set up for certain people and keep others out of it.

If our nation is really for the achievement of the Sustainable development goals by 2030, then SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent work and Economic growth) has to be grounded on work they are doing to eradicate poverty.

Once I was asked, 'What do you know now after being at DIVA, that you never used to know about poverty?' I know that poverty exists because greed for wealth and power has taken over systems and processes that were set up to serve and benefit all people including women and children regardless of who they are, or who they choose to be.

This issue of poverty has impacts in all our lives but hits differently. So I am writing this for myself and others who share similar experiences. I hope we will keep writing about our own lived realities in poverty and that we can work together so that we can do more impactful work in eradicating poverty as a nation.



# DIVA ANALYSIS: FEMINIST AND GENDER-JUST APPROACHES TO POVERTY ERADICATION



Authors: Noelene Nabulivou and Frances Tawake, DIVA for Equality, Nadi, Fiji

“(G)endered poverty, as a process of deprivation and depletion, where women are not just left behind but pushed behind by economic and social structures.” -**Diane Elson, Feminist Economist**

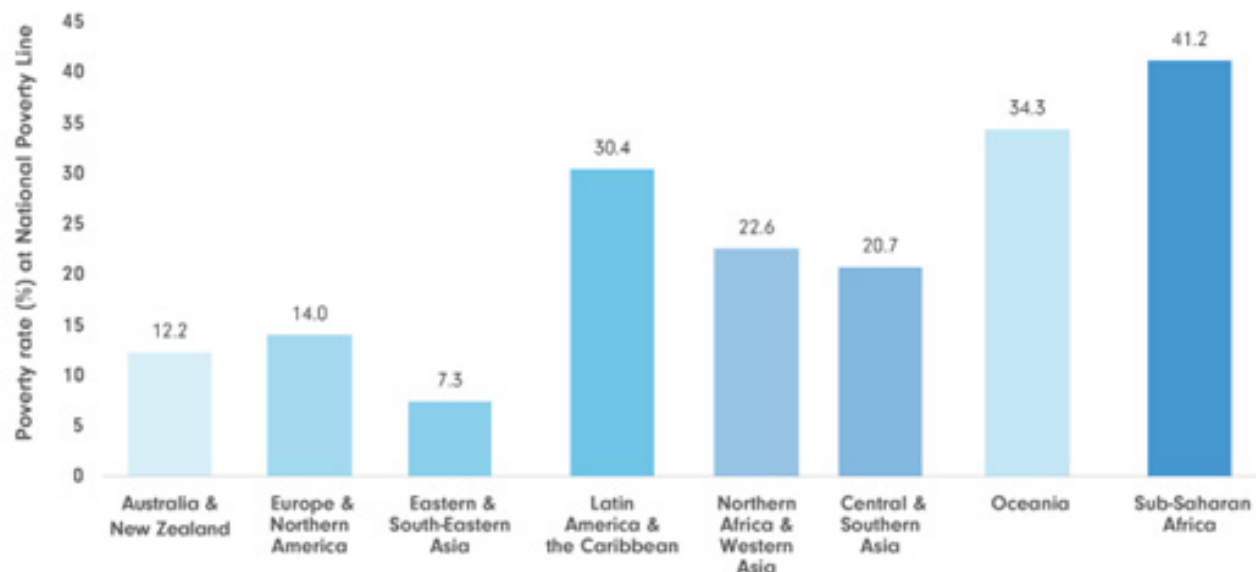
“People who are poor and people who are homeless shouldn’t be shamed. It’s actually a shame of the system.” - **Nijmie Dzurinko, Community organiser, West Philadelphia USA**

“Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is manmade, and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life.” -**Nelson Mandela, South Africa**

“(I)f current trends continue, over 340 million women and girls – an estimated 8 percent of the world’s female population – will live in extreme poverty by 2030, and close to one in four will experience moderate or severe food insecurity.” - **UNWomen and UNDESA, 2022.**

**By 2050, climate change will push up to 158 million more women and girls into poverty and lead to 236 million more women into hunger. - UNWomen, 2023**

## Female poverty rates by region, using national poverty line estimates, 2022 projections



Source: UN Women, UNDP and Pardee Center for International Futures using the International Futures modeling platform.

Note: Based on a sample of 186 countries..

In the graph above on percentage of female poverty rates per region, we see that **Oceania has the second highest rate (34.3%) after Sub-Saharan Africa (41.2%)**. Poverty is very much present in the Pacific region whether we choose to recognise it or not. It is a major gender and development justice issue in Pacific small island States and societies. Let's tackle it urgently, robustly, and with care.

There are many experts including feminist economists and other activists who make regular inroads into specific local and global technical questions of gender-just economic laws, policy and process and propose a better set of economic futures for us all. But we don't listen enough to their knowledge and wisdom. Feminist economics draws from Marxian political economy, institutionalist economics and ecological economics and from disciplines such as economics, psychology, philosophy and political science, interdisciplinary studies, gender studies, among others. DIVA for Equality is part of these wider, deeper movement efforts. Examples of serious feminist economic justice initiatives, some decades-old and some emergent in the past year are **Development Alternatives with Women for a new Era (DAWN)**; **Gender and Trade Coalition** co-convened by Regions Refocus and the South Centre;

**Gender and Environment Data Alliance (GEDA)** co-convened by WEDO and IUCN, the **Southern Feminist Alliance on Economic Justice** convened by Genero Equidad, **South Feminist Fiscal Justice Coalition, Equality Insights** convened by IWDA and others. We are working to urgently raise collective feminist and anti-colonial, leftwing movement strategies to address this polycrises of human rights violations, nuclear threat and perpetual war, food, water and sanitation, militarisation, energy, crippling South debt bondage, aggressive austerity, financialization, pandemics, antibiotic resistance, and the existential threat to our own and other species, and the living Planet.

The problem is that while we have seen some pockets of development and recognition of crucial feminist and heterodox economics work, the jump to mainstream use of robust and feasible methodologies for individual level, gender-responsive measurement of multidimensional poverty has not yet happened, even though we have some exciting models and initiatives over time like the remaking of social contracts work by DAWN, Individual Deprivation Measures (IDM), Equality Insight and Multidimensional Poverty Measures and more.

CSW68 must place squarely on the table now with governments and development institutions, the systemic injustice, gaps and barriers to achieving economic justice for all including women and gender diverse people, and to do this in a feminist way that contends with the resurgence of austerity in the era of Covid-19, and speaking to real “possibilities, alternatives, solutions, and strategies that can be employed, including independent debt audits, national dialogue, and advocacy within the negotiation process...to ensure that there are real, universal, unconditional, untargeted social protection measures as a key demand to help minimise the enormous negative impacts of debt restructuring on poverty, labour, and wellbeing.” (Muchhala, B. April 2022),

As raised by the Gender and Trade Coalition (GTC) consisting of over 300 feminist groups and co-convened by Regions Refocus and the South Centre, “In the fight against austerity, privatization, deregulation, and liberalization, participants agreed on the need to forcefully counter the neoliberal co-optation of women’s rights as a means to deflect critique and continue to expand the unjust trade system and exploit workers and the global South. With groups reiterating the critical role progressive movements and networks played in shaping progressive social change in the 2000s, the GTC was born.”

In the resources section there are some feminist and progressive economic resources and references. Look online for more. This booklet is not trying to get to grips here with the immense, powerful body of feminist and heterodox economics. What DIVA for Equality and Poverty to Power Network provides in this booklet is a grassroots-informed contribution by Pacific feminists that is simple, easy-to-read and with some clear recommendations to CSW68 and beyond. This is our practical contribution toward reconfiguration of societal and state priorities including in our own country and region. We offer feminist grassroots-led proposals to address poverty eradication and build social, economic, ecological and climate justice, and universal human rights.

Pacific feminist activist authors provide this booklet in the middle of a patriarchal small-island society and State while experiencing loss and damage from climate change, worsening macro-economic

systems by imperialist and colonial countries who should know better, and as new variants of COVID19 show that zoonotic diseases are far from over. We are also just weeks from the 68th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2024 with a priority thematic lens on poverty and economic justice. We seize the moment to be part of this global feminist urgent work to end poverty and claim economic justice, but more importantly to ensure that this work is configured within the urgent defence of our own and other species, and this living Planet. We know the realities of this ecocidal time, and our part in a growing feminist survival struggle.

**To change our work on poverty, we must (re) examine and (re)search women’s experiences of society, government and the State**

**In advancing the way that we address gender, poverty and economic justice in Fiji and Pacific small island States, let’s ensure that we are clear on the particular urgency, context and conditions of women in Fiji and the Pacific.** This influences both the experiences of, and responses to poverty and economic injustice. The twenty three (23) sensitively described, brave and often harrowing life-stories and analysis of the DIVA Poverty to Power Network bring to the surface experiential factors in the lives of Fiji women and girls and gender diverse people. They show how poverty is exacerbated, how it feels, and what we need to change to support women on pro-poor, just economic strategies. We want to be clearer on what feminist, gender-just strategies are necessary to survive, the costs of poverty on women’s minds and bodies and why Fiji feminist pro-poor and economic justice work matters for development justice and human rights. Economic justice analysis by women from high poverty backgrounds is necessary to correct myths and misconceptions and to advance strategies to address gaps and obstacles to end poverty and build socio-economic, ecological and climate justice in Fiji and the Pacific.

**It is a gross unfairness and distortion that Fijian State and society do not recognise in policy or in practice the huge burden of unpaid care, domestic and communal work carried by the women, girls and gender diverse people of Fiji.** In Fiji unpaid work is highest among young mothers, single

mothers, widows, women with disabilities, and women who have married into a community with more risk of social isolation and lack of kinship/local status. However, it affects a majority of Fiji working-age women and worsens as women become elderly. Women (not men) are expected to be responsible for unpaid care work in households and surroundings and women are also expected to prioritise unpaid care work over economic activity (Fiji Country Gender Assessment/FCGA).

There is no deliberative response by the Fiji State to recognise this problem of unfair gendered work burden and challenge current planning, social welfare, economic, work and leisure systems. There is a need for the State and society to use the 5R or 6R framework (Elson, D) to construct a fairer social provisioning system and care economy. Here we can **recognise, reduce, redistribute, reward, represent women's unpaid care, domestic and communal work**. As DIVA for Equality is adding through a 6th proposed 'R', we must **reconfigure** society and State for the needs of everyone, explicitly including women, girls and gender diverse people. The proposals below are necessary for women to experience societal and governmental systems as just, liberatory and inclusive of their needs.

**For most women in Fiji, gender discrimination begins in their earliest life and continues and even increases as they become older.** If the State and society do not recognise the gendered aspects of these life experiences, then we will not respond with social provisioning that can assist in adequate and appropriate ways. The stories in this booklet lay out inter-generational experiences and lifetimes of gendered oppression, discrimination and mental, physical and sexual violence. Women with disabilities and members of the LGBTQI+ community experience lifetimes of exacerbated stigma, marginalisation and violence that worsen poverty levels into old age. Both women and men express concerns about disability and ill health as old age approaches - a lack of basic needs of food, water and sanitation, housing and health, mobility, lack of autonomy, and ability to work and fulfil family and community obligations.

In the Fiji Country Gender Assessment, women more than men express concerns about disability and poor health affecting their ability to earn money. There is a wide expression of financial insecurity of

women who have not accumulated savings and who outlive husbands that financially supported them. Many women in DIVA's Fiji networks, borne out by national research, express concern about being more vulnerable to poverty, abuse and financial exploitation as they age. In emergency situations such as during and after a natural disaster, older women (and men) may be subjected to exacerbated physical and emotional violence.

We are hearing many accounts from our community network of connections between gender inequality, poverty, lack of housing and land tenure. Older iTaukei women speak of widowhood bringing a loss of status in the family, sometimes chased away from family homes as sons and nephews bring in new partners or if the wider kinship network decides it wants a return of the house for other family members once the male member of the household dies. Elder women's lack of status and inability to negotiate or litigate in patriarchal systems of inheritance, tenure and usage rights to kinship owned houses and land, mean they become increasingly dependent on the goodwill of individual members or their biological family elsewhere, to give them housing, food, water and other basic needs. It is the reason for much feminisation of poverty, transitional housing, homelessness, poor health outcomes and earlier death of women of all ages, and especially elders. DIVA visits many elderly women relegated to living in partially enclosed verandah areas, under houses or in other inadequate conditions of care. The exacerbated poverty of elderly women in Fiji is prevalent, hidden and in need of adequate, sustained and resourced societal and State response. Older women face significant vulnerabilities as they age because of income insecurity. The Fiji National Provident Fund national pension scheme includes 74% male and only 26% female recipients. The State implements social welfare policies focused on paid work, under-acknowledging unpaid care, domestic and communal work of women that must be recognised and rewarded with universal, higher pensions reflecting lifetimes of work in home and community.

**We are determined to bring more attention to the gross burden of 'Soqo work' or communal work on which iTaukei life turns, with extreme implications for women's lives and their poverty levels.** When you are not supposed to have voice and agency as happens in patriarchal societies like Fiji, then

the socio-economic systems oppress women in a myriad of ways. Women do 3-5 times as much work as men in Fiji (ADB, 2019, Oxfam, 2024 Upcoming), and a significant part of that work is for their own households, and others in the local community. They work and also raise funds, contribute cultural items and food for births, marriages, deaths and more. As the life stories here show, it has huge consequences for women and children. Money used for wider societal priorities is not there for basic needs of households and while they are kept from formal decision making, still women are generally those expected to find food, water, carer, basic health and education supplies for the family, while the men often focus on communal obligations and lead in formal community leadership, with consequences for their own health and wellbeing. Only certain kinship members benefit from communal obligations as raised time and again in the ABC analysis, with many women and children bearing the brunt of a poverty cycle that worsens over time even as community obligations continue and increase, with little respite. When a relationship or poor household collapses under the weight as in many of the ABC analyses, there is little in the way of social measures to address this, by society or State. So strategies for women include trying to get into HART housing, tarpaulin shelters, sleeping on family verandahs or under a market stall and the problematic transitory housing with relatives who do not necessarily have means to support, and all are short-term, partial strategies. Groups like DIVA help but with lack of resources. Women authors here talk about the frustration and shame when they cannot break the cycle of poverty despite such hard work. They speak about the attendant violence, trauma, abuse and sometimes loss of life. We can do better for women. A new kind of development justice is necessary.

Poverty in Fiji is not just about lack of decent work. It is that work in Fiji is a hybrid of communalism and individualist neoliberal capitalist systems. Women are captured in oppressive familial and community relationships, to provide endless work while being subjected to heightened conditions of poverty. This, while the State and society choose not to see, nor to respond, to the consequences. The articulation of national, regional and global development strategies and measures to address poverty and economic injustice generally do not address patriarchy and misogyny. So the feminisation of

poverty and gender injustice deepens as legislation, policy and practice do not serve women, children nor gender diverse people but rather an imagined male led, nuclear family oriented system that is colonial, patriarchal and does not serve us in this complex time of polycrises, climate emergency and ecological unrest.

This socio-economic crisis cannot be viewed through a gender-neutral lens; instead, it is deeply entwined with structural inequalities that shape the lives of women, girls and gender diverse people in Fiji. Coloniality and cultural norms limit women's access to vital resources, quality education, and economic opportunities. These challenges are further compounded for gender non-binary individuals, LGBTQ+ women, heads of single-parent households, widows, sex workers, women living with disabilities, and women who endure systemic oppression at every level and who are victims and survivors of gender-based violence. Read this in the stories of 23 women.

Almost no women in DIVA networks are free from mental, physical and sexual violence, many from an early age. The experiences of girl-children in Fiji are shocking in the way that they set up lives of mental and physical health challenges and expose children to early childhood exacerbating factors for leaving school early, difficulties in accessing education and work, for transitional housing, insecure housing, high poverty conditions and more. A recent important national study showed that four out of five Fiji children face some form of abuse, child sexual abuse is predominantly suffered by girls starting from as young as under 5 years old, majority by men they know aged 16-40 years old, and facing continued abuse through their teens and into adulthood. (Govt of Fiji, USP, FNU, MFAT, UNICEF).

In the DIVA 2019 research report, over 45 percent of LGBTQ+ respondents similarly stated that they had been forced or left their homes due to their sexuality before they were 18 years old. Development consequences are clear when children are already transient and traumatised at such an early age. Poverty is high not just because of policy inadequacy, but because we are not a sufficiently caring, just, responsive society for young people, children and women in Fiji.

We must have caring, wellbeing and social provisioning policy initiatives but beyond this, society and State must be configured in a way that recognises the consequences of violent and discriminatory patriarchy, so that socio-economic and environmental policy is developed with victim/survivors in mind, not an imagined male citizen who already has too much. This is difficult but necessary for Fiji politicians, political parties and the public to hear. Our CSW68 collective demands need to aim beyond mere economic strategies. We require a profound transformation of societal norms and structures that have perpetuated and exacerbated a wide range of inequalities that women, girls and gender diverse people face in Fiji.

In the Fijian context, difficult colonial and capitalist social norms persist for iTaukei people in the 21st century with real consequences for how money, resources and power flow through formal and informal governance structures, Indigenous institutions, communities and households, and how poverty is viewed and engaged. To be recognized as a successful woman or man, certain aspirational community norms must be met or strong social sanction occurs. One is expected to have access to Indigenous ties and land ownership, be actively churchgoing, heterosexual with multiple children (and women are generally sanctioned heavily if they are without children, it can be one of the reasons why women are forced/encouraged to leave households and kinship networks), in gender-normed work and participating actively in community life. You are supposed to make substantial cash and kind contributions to church and community activities regardless of your economic status, and to contribute to village or settlement life on an ongoing and predictable basis. When extreme lack of resources is clear, status diminishes.

Many women feel compelled to strive relentlessly to meet these criteria of a 'good and godly Woman', even though their contributions are frequently undervalued and their sacrifices, unacknowledged. Fijian women are clearer now that they are often exhausted, but it is also the case that they are not supposed to complain, at least publicly. In this struggle for survival and recognition, Fiji women often find themselves trapped in a cycle where their hard-earned resources are continually channelled into community and church activities, often with little reciprocation. With each step toward financial

stability they find themselves burdened with more responsibilities, frequently imposed by traditional authorities and organised community groups demanding further contributions to the 'Vanua' or the Church. The Vanua is a manifestation not only of land relations but of kinship, connection and interdependence between nature and society. As an example, the phrase 'the way of the land', or Fijian customs and values, is called 'Vakavanua'. As the colonial British system worked with early iTaukei leaders toward a now-written and codified land relationship, the care of Vanua has become further complicated and as women write here, it is a hybrid of a cash-based system entwined with older barter and non-monetary relationships. The relentless cycle of gendered iTaukei responsibilities in a modernising neoliberal Capitalist world complicates ideas about social monetary systems, and about poverty. As you will read in the ABC analysis, it often deprives poor women of opportunities to work, save and advocate for their own economic well-being, and greatly lessens the right to rest and leisure for women. Since Independence in 1970, the State and society have not yet found the right path.

Amidst these challenges, the Poverty to Power network emerged in 2019 during the COVID19 pandemic. Women have jumped at the opportunity and there are over 40 women so far, including LGBTQ+ women and gender diverse people from all over Fiji. They are analysing their experiences of poverty and each other, leaving family settings for intense learning camps, learning wellbeing and care work, building networks and new friendships (with support for their elder and child care and income substitution). They are opening micro-businesses, sometimes commiserating when facing a hurdle, writing CVs, applying for decent work and business permits, opening first-time bank accounts, dealing with health and education crises, and meticulously monitoring progress over the past year, writing ABC analysis and preparing for the launch, and CSW68 advocacy.

DIVA for Equality and network members made a decision in the beginning not to document merely successes nor even just the hurdles of running micro and small businesses, but to analyse carefully the gaps and obstacles to socio-economic and ecological justice that they face because they are poor women. This ability to sit in the pain of patriarchal conditions, to name the injustice and

to recognise them as systemic obstacles, has changed the shape of many lives in the network and resulted in searingly honest, hard-to-read stories and analysis of women trying their hardest to end poverty, but challenged by so many unfair social, economic, ecological and climate realities.

So the bravery of writing against a patriarchal mainstream is just one thing. Many challenges persist and struggles to survive and thrive are impacted by a context that remains highly dangerous and unfavourable to women. We have already underscored the gendered statistics of the Fiji Country Gender Assessment - everyone can see the evidence. However, Fijian culture still predominantly perceives business ownership and social leadership as a masculine endeavour. This places most women in an arduous position of balancing high levels of traditional paid and unpaid care, domestic and communal roles with entrepreneurial, educational and other aspirations, and trying to find decent work. The prevailing stereotypes demand that women primarily attend to household and childcare responsibilities whatever else they take on, creating a profound challenge for work-life balance, rest and leisure.

Regardless of brave efforts to improve their quality of life, women in the network find themselves perpetually challenged by bodies, minds and hearts that are exhausted, with little leisure or time for social and political activities, and frustrated by their constant work for little group or individual reward. Mental health challenges are strong. For example, women entrepreneurs, especially when they are living in poverty, fall prey to exploitation by close family members, particularly if they have disabilities. Poor LGBTQ+ women experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, and even when simply trying to sell their products on the streets and in markets. Many people refuse to engage with LGBTQ entrepreneurs due to their sexuality, impeding their ability to run and grow businesses. We have seen microbusinesses coercively taken away from women, if not considered 'good women'. Another group liaised with a government department that randomly reduced the size of an application of land for a farming initiative, as they are 'women and probably do not need that many acres.'

Women's health outcomes diminish quickly

in patriarchal conditions, and the epidemic proportions of the rate of five leading reproductive cancers in Fiji, NCDs and now HIV rates continue to rise. Only around 50% of Fiji women source follow-up care after a breast and cervical cancer diagnosis (FWRM, 2017). Poor health outcomes for poor women are a symptom of many things including rising poverty and a public health system that is under many threats, including a large number of nurses leaving for overseas work. DIVA for Equality is facing a situation where many poor women in the network request funds for private doctor diagnosis. They request accompaniment through healthcare systems, medicine, care packages for severe illness when hospitalised, and help in times of palliative care. Sadly, often now we fundraise many more for, 'women's funerals with dignity'.

The devastating consequences of poverty in Fiji have rendered so many women angry, hurt - and motivated. Their immense talents and skill remain trapped within the realities of poverty. They are often immensely frustrated and resentful. The ABC stories show clearly the cycles, conditions and consequences of poverty and economic injustice in Fiji, and the determination to find strategies to earn income for themselves and those they love.

It is evident that women in the Poverty to Power Network find it exceedingly challenging to meet the basic needs for themselves and families. It is not the women in the DIVA network who need to pursue more strategies, it is society and the government, international development sector and funders. Their experiences today in Fiji serve as a resounding call for targeted policies and interventions that acknowledge and address the unique historical and present-day context, conditions and circumstances of women living in poverty in Fiji.

**Listen carefully and respond to the life experiences of women and girls living in poverty and those experiencing gender based violence and discrimination**

Societies and States must invest in change through political will, policy development and implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of progress. But how can women and gender diverse people best engage and influence decision makers when there are few inroads nor incentives to



challenge patriarchal norms, masculinist power and control of socio-economic, ecological resources?

Often feminist proposals seem suspect and counterintuitive to a male-centric, anthropocentric society and State. Sometimes the way that things have been done over centuries and decades are just wrong. They set up and keep power in the hands of male leaders and elites. So we must insist on being taken seriously, using sound feminist analysis, advocacy, movement-building and of course solidarity and allyship from those who prosper or profit from the current systems. This is not easy to muster. The ways that we currently work on poverty and inequity in Fiji and the Pacific show disconnections from those actually living in poverty, especially women. There are many ways we can fill those gaps in analysis and response, and some of these issues are addressed below:

First, in the Pacific including Fiji, there is a tendency to shy away even from the articulation of 'poverty' as a development issue. Perhaps this is a hangover of colonial and postcolonial eras and a pushback against Westernised commodification and affluenza. Perhaps it does not align with normed images of beautiful, peaceful islands of our Oceanic name, and the idea that tall, strong, smiling, brown Pacific Islanders live in homogenous paradise and tourists can come and experience our bliss. The occidental and exotic is still firmly in place. Poverty interferes with that carefully constructed image. We see it furthered now in the increase in gated communities, closure of public beaches so that locals have fewer places to rest, fish and forage without permission especially if you are not a landowner, and even then rights are often being removed where expatriates move into the best beachside and island locations, or development culture prevails over local tenure. This is not just a recent phenomenon but it is rising as people seek escape from changing climate conditions globally, and seek a quieter and safer lifestyle.

This, and the ravages of neoliberal capitalism building over the second half of the 20th century have caused Fiji greater austerity, commodification and marketisation of governance, bureaucracies and professionalised workforces and an export and foreign exchange oriented policy orientation at the expense of diversified local agroecology, water security and food sovereignty. We have seen ever-

rising prices on housing rentals and property prices, debt to GDP ratio has exploded to over 80%, and many other economic consequences. Over time, housing, water, food, education, healthcare and other basic needs have become more unaffordable for each successive generation of Fijians. Poverty and disillusion rises. This is not the full story of rising poverty, but a significant part of it. We are a strong and resilient people but that does not discount geopolitical and development realities.

Secondly, governments generally do not want to focus on negatives in their cyclical electoral-driven processes. Fiji had a militarised government from 2007-2022 that was particularly sensitive and pushed back on any critique of socio-economic and environmental policies, feminist or otherwise. It was not easy to propose transformative economic policy in that time, but this has not yet changed and it shows the ever-present patriarchal values. Successive governments talk of development positives and possibilities but it is not easy to transformatively change the landscape and trajectory of economic paradigms, even if a major gender-just pivot is clearly required. For example, an aspirational change leading to a Ministry name change from 'poverty alleviation' to 'social protection' does not mean that there will necessarily be sufficient political will nor resources for gender-just poverty eradication, care economies and social provisioning, nor to address 'inequalities within and between countries' (Agenda 2023, SDG10). We continue to advance a transformative gender-just economic agenda, including through this booklet, but there is much to transform in the way we collectively encounter poverty and work together to eradicate it from our societies.

Thirdly and most significantly, our country and region do not exactly stand as a beacon for gender equality and universal human rights. In fact the opposite. We have some of the highest global rates per capita of violence against women and girls. Globally, 1 in 3 women will experience physical and/or sexual violence from a partner in their lifetime. Fiji has some of the highest rates of violence against women in the world, and violence against LGBTQIA+ people similarly high. We know that 2 in 3 women in Fiji have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a male intimate partner in their lifetime. (FWCC 2013, and Fiji NAP to Prevent VAWG, 2023). Violence against LGBTQIA+ people is

even higher (DIVA, 2019) and the Pacific has some of the lowest rates of women in leadership in the national legislature, highest ratios of unpaid work for women over men, and low rates of contraceptive uptake. We also can see from the official statistics below that there are so many aspects of oppression and deprivation experienced by women in Fiji.

Official development statistics in Fiji, especially in the Fiji Country Gender Assessment (2023) clearly show the need for focused action on poverty eradication and toward development justice in Fiji. On the issue of food insecurity, in Fiji's informal settlements almost one quarter (24%) of women reported in mid 2020 that they and their household members had skipped daily meals and/or were consuming smaller portions in order to make their food supplies last longer. Two thirds of Fiji women were worried about running out of food due to the significant economic impacts of job loss and reduced income as a result of COVID-19. Between February and July 2020, 40% of Fijian households in peri-urban communities experienced mild food insecurity, 32% had moderate food insecurity and 17% experienced severe food insecurity.

As to lack of water and sanitation as poverty indicators, in 2020 only 31% of Fijians had access to safely managed water, meaning that it is available on the premises, tested free of E. coli bacteria and was available when needed (SDG 6.1.1). Further, from 2000 to 2017 the proportion of rural households with access to water on their premises dropped significantly, from 60% to 35%. This is due to loss and damage from cyclones for which there were insufficient State funds to repair and due to intra-state migration and movement. Water reliability is also a major problem in Fiji, with only about one half of household members (54%) reporting they always have water when they need it. Rapid urbanisation in Fiji has led to the proliferation of urban and peri-urban informal settlements and in 2016, a survey found that 23% of dwellings in informal settlements had no formal water connection. Further, 40% of residents reported they rarely had enough water to meet their needs with frequent service disruptions and, on average, the quantity of water supplied is 40 litres/person/day or less. This is compared with the international standard of 180 litres per person per day. On sanitation, the same 2016 study also found that approximately one in every five Fiji households (22%) rely on poor, shared sanitation facilities. A

2015 evaluation found that, in addition to shared facilities, there are inadequate and unreliable operations and maintenance of sanitation facilities and limited handwashing facilities adjacent to toilets in Fiji's informal settlements. Currently, two-thirds of the Pacific population rely on unprotected sources of water and unsanitary means of excreta disposal which pose serious risks to health. Preventable water-borne illnesses and mortality from WASH conditions are higher in Pacific Islands than in Asia, particularly among vulnerable population groups, including infants and the elderly (WASH Ref Group, 2020)

On women's health as a poverty indicator, from 2015 - 2017 Fiji women's cancers of the reproductive organs, in particular breast and cervical cancers, were the leading non-communicable (NCD) cause of death among Fijian women of all ages. Older women have roughly equal and very high rates of death from cancers, cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Cardiovascular disease was the leading NCD cause of death among men of all ages. Non-communicable diseases accounted for 44% of deaths among young adults (15–34 years) and a huge 75% of deaths among older adults (35–59 years). NCDs have been responsible for more than 70% of premature deaths in Fiji for over a decade. Health outcomes are a justice issue in South countries, which is why we need to consider this issue at CSW68. We know for example, that rates of cervical cancer are far worse in developing countries, with 86% of all cervical cancer cases and 88% of all cervical cancer deaths worldwide in developing countries. Global Inequalities in cervical cancer incidence and mortality are linked to deprivation, low socioeconomic status, and human rights and development.

A majority (84%) of Fiji lesbians, bisexual women, transmen, queer (LBTQ) and gender diverse people surveyed in DIVA's 2019 report, say that Fiji health care workers they have consulted are generally neutral or supportive. A small proportion (5%) of LBT and GNCP do not access health services because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, of those surveyed only 2% had ever had pap smears, and only 10% ever had mammograms. They perceive generalised gaps in, and barriers to, health services due to discrimination, lack of confidentiality and limitations accessing quality and affordable SRHR and mental health services.

A majority (71%) prefer for safety reasons to see a woman doctor, a majority (60%) want LGBTQ-specific services and due to high trauma and stress from transphobia and homophobia, 77% want counsellors and mental health professionals who are LGBTQIA+ (DIVA, 2019).

To end poverty, we must treat women, girls and gender diverse people equitably in every part of our societies and States

Feminists know that in order to change society and states toward universal socio-economic, ecological and climate justice takes multiple sets of work, major resources, trial and error, challenges to inevitable pushback and sustained bravery over decades. As Amartya Sen asserted (1999) development justice requires a focus on liberation: 'freedom from', 'freedom to', and as others have extended, 'freedom with' (Jack, Plahe and Wright, 2022). Am I free to make my decisions as a person? Am I free from gender based violence and societal stigma and discrimination in order to make decision-making possible? Can I function within my social groups and institutions? Am I free to move as an individual and within groups? In what spheres am I best able to make decisions and where is it just not possible for me without great cost?

It is generally a feminist aim to negotiate bodily autonomy and integrity as individuals and simultaneously to navigate collective, societal norms, as above. We know that we need feminist decolonial, anti-racist, intersectional and interlinkage lenses. We need to recognise the constricting nature of patriarchy and misogyny on every aspect of our lives, and what it takes to free ourselves and others. This is clearly the work of feminist social movements to lead, as it is for all others to join.

Women and gender diverse people in DIVA for Equality networks are working hard to end heavily ingrained, inequitable societal practices. Through praxis cycles we deepen and accelerate praxis toward freedom, balance and justice. For DIVA this is experiential work since 2011 carried through LGBTQIA+ Hubs, Poverty to Power network, Women Defend Commons Network, Qaqa Grassroots Young Feminist Network, Pacific Partnerships on Gender, Climate Change and Sustainable Development, Pacific Feminist Community of Practice, Pacific

Feminist SRHR Coalition and now wider linked initiatives with the Fiji NGO Coalition on Human Rights, Pacific Islands Feminist Alliance for Climate Justice, Pacific Women Mediators Network, Pacific Conference of Churches, Pacific Islands Climate Action Network, Women's Major Group on Sustainable Development, Women and Gender Constituency (to the UNFCCC), Women's Rights Caucus and SOGI Caucus (to the Commission on the Status of Women CSW), AWID, Thousand Currents, Lesbian Feminist Foundation, Fos Feminista, and more.

How do we do this work on gender and poverty? Very carefully. To tackle the Pacific feminisation of poverty and gender injustice is difficult because it requires clear, assertive problem identification in the middle of fierce, hyper-developmental, small-island patriarchal systems that are long-oppressing women and gender diverse people of all ethnicities and backgrounds and in highly normalised, context-specific ways. Women need to find their safe groups, conscientise themselves, mobilise, resource and organise over time in the middle of personal relationships, households, kinship networks and societal institutions (state and non-state) that work VERY hard to convince women not to make radical changes.

So this requires work over decades to resist pushback even as the feminist networks grow, mature and propose better solutions. This is exhausting, disheartening and time-consuming. Power-full doors are closed or let feminists in, only if they 'behave'. If we refuse to conform to development norms, we are often quietly cancelled or sidelined as rabble-rousers and more amenable groups are included or development institutions work with more palatable, acceptable 'at-risk' groupings of people with disabilities, young people, or girl child, etc. No-one is supposed to be 'left behind', but some are barely invited or tolerated: lesbians, sex workers, women living in poverty and such. Some groups are equal but some are more equal than others in development and human rights quarters. If you raise this, there are startled disclaimers. However, as Noam Chomsky (2024) has perceptively raised, many have become used to a manufactured, limited spectrum of development debate that really only enhances and upholds opinions of an elite status quo, ingrained in people's minds as the entire possible spectrum of opinion when we do not really

stretch analysis and action at all - so too with much work on poverty and economics. There is little of transformative quality. Can this change? We think, yes.

Nonetheless, local, Indigenous and grassroots groups of feminists in the Pacific have banded together and re-proposed over time in stronger and wider feminist groups, alliances and coalitions so that it is harder to ignore or undermine us. Here is where we find ourselves as feminists on Pacific work for development justice, including on poverty eradication:

First, the core of much feminist activism and movement-building is a personal/political agreement to work for universal human rights and gender justice. We ensure that principles and values are clear and unequivocal.

Secondly, we are building our work together on deep and direct democracy, and on mutual aid where those most experiencing poverty and oppression are those genuinely engaged and informing all development justice work.

Third, we have clear statements of intent and declarations, and these are a springboard for the work we take forward, being clear to all development interests.

Fourth, we do not assume that all are allies for gender justice even if in development institutions, so a core part of our work is to strategize for frontline, midline and reformist work but not to pretend that all development work has common intent and transformative potential for liberation and human rights of women, girls and gender diverse people.

Fifth, transformation toward social, economic, ecological and climate justice has to take place right through individual relations to widest State domestic and foreign policy and also full scale change to social contracts. The type of feminist interventions we will all make, are dependent on many factors - including whether you are part of an extractive colonial, Imperialist society and State, or a survivor and anti-colonialist activist. It is also about whether you participate in taking down misogynist patriarchy in all forms, both immediate and intergenerational. It is about recognising intersectional identities, and varied experiences of privilege and oppression.

Work on ending poverty is all our responsibility. But we are not all marked similarly by poverty. All do the work, but women in poverty must lead. This deliberate engagement by marginalised and disenfranchised women living in poverty is necessary not just because it is ethical, but because it is transformative in its politics, content and outcomes. Women and gender diverse people like those in DIVA for Equality and the Poverty to Power Network are experts on the experiences, gaps and obstacles to economic justice. They will often point out where the rest of society is blind to oppression and privilege.

If one does not experience poverty, you can be empathetic and knowledgeable, but that does not necessarily correlate with useful strategy. Fiji had a past Minister for Women who, when accompanying DIVA for Equality to an informal settlement (and after a year in office), confided that she had never prior visited an informal settlement. Another progressive Minister for Women had never visited a particularly large remote island and went with DIVA for Equality to open a national women's CSO meeting on climate justice. If you do not know well those who experience a problem in your country, then you cannot properly advocate for it, nor fix it. If men leaders do not even consider women their contemporaries, then you will not consult us. Nothing about us, without us, is much more than rhetoric.

These realities require careful strategy. Women living with poverty create daily strategies to address gender based poverty and inequality including gender based violence, stigma and injustice. They are so well-placed to critique and propose strategies on the micro, meso and macro economic, trade, finance and development systems. But ironically they rarely make it into the majority of economic decision-making rooms. Most societies and States are not set up to substantively and consistently consult and draw on the leadership of women in poverty. Inaccurate, misguided and wrongly targeted approaches persist at local, national, regional and global levels. For example, there may be a tendency to try to minimise social welfare bills when any closer economic research will show you that the financial problems are about wrong emphasis in national budgets, inadequate taxation of medium and large companies, often hand-in-

glove with government and personal friends of politicians and the undue influence of heavily capitalist transnational corporations including those who get large tax concessions and write-offs for decades. There are poorly-designed, International Financial Institution (IFI) pushed austerity policies that raise debt levels and pull away lifegiving funds from social provision and care, and move privileged concessions for industries with political friendships and linkages.

If you think that ‘the poor’ are the problem, then you will try to legislate them into compliance, never touching the core of economic injustice and requirement for structural change. You will set up social systems that keep them at arm’s length, that do not consult poor people, that presume that they do not know what is best for them, and urge them to ‘walk out of poverty’. Feminists know that sexism, racism, coloniality, patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism all work together to keep some people wealthy and well-provisioned, and others in poverty. Pacific feminists are interested in tearing down injustice and building development justice for ‘all women, all people, all human rights, social, economic, ecological and climate justice, for all. (DIVA for Equality vision statement, 2011-current).

Make serious changes to national socio-economic and ecological systems so that they better support women in high poverty situations

On gender just data and analysis, the UNDP Multidimensional Poverty Index already shows that it is useful and possible nationally to track poverty and economic deprivation across at least three dimensions and 10 indicators: health (child mortality, nutrition), education (years of schooling, enrollment), and living standards (water, sanitation, electricity, cooking fuel, floor, and assets). The health and education dimensions are based on two indicators each, while standard of living is based on six indicators. According to ADB, in Fiji 24.1% or nearly a quarter of the population lived below the national poverty line in 2019 (latest figures).

Feminists know that such data is not nearly enough. For example, Equality Insight is a gender data program delivered by the International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA) that collects quality, gender-sensitive data about multidimensional

poverty and inequality to accelerate response. The data across at least 15 indicators enable decision-makers to develop targeted, evidence-based and data-driven solutions that tackle poverty and reduce inequalities.

In Fiji, a study by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics and the then Individual Deprivation Measure (IDM), now Equality Insight, showed that feminist multidimensional data and analysis can offer additional information to complement existing and on-going work on poverty and deprivation between national surveys (every 5 years) and census data (every 10 years) to provide wide-ranging comprehensive data on households in the country. They can offer data on who is poor, in what ways and to what extent. They provide high-quality data on the extent and depth of individual deprivation in order to encourage greater gendered analysis on what the lived experience of poverty looks like by at minimum the indicators of SDG 1 (‘End poverty in all its forms everywhere’), which call for disaggregation of multidimensional poverty data by gender, age, disability, and geography, and hopefully across many more intersectional variables.

A lack of investment in and application of feminist-led gender data and analysis is still a significant barrier to effective policy making and implementation in all areas. This focus on poverty at CSW68 and on SDG 1 at the High Level Political Forum 2024 presents an opportunity to shift approaches to poverty measurement towards routine collection of disaggregated data revealing the implications of gender, age, disability and intersections to end poverty and achieve economic justice (IWDA, 2024).

Let’s make more change : Feminist, Human rights and Gender-Just Approaches to Poverty Eradication and Economic Justice

“These instruments (UN international agreements) are rooted in notions of equality and fairness which all cultures possess in some form, but which have been mitigated to some degree by social factors such as patriarchy, power relationships and gender roles. The journey to full and meaningful equality is a continuing one.” - Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, Fiji feminist lawyer, legal scholar, jurist, High Chief. Past Fiji Vice-president, acting President and Chief Justice of Nauru.

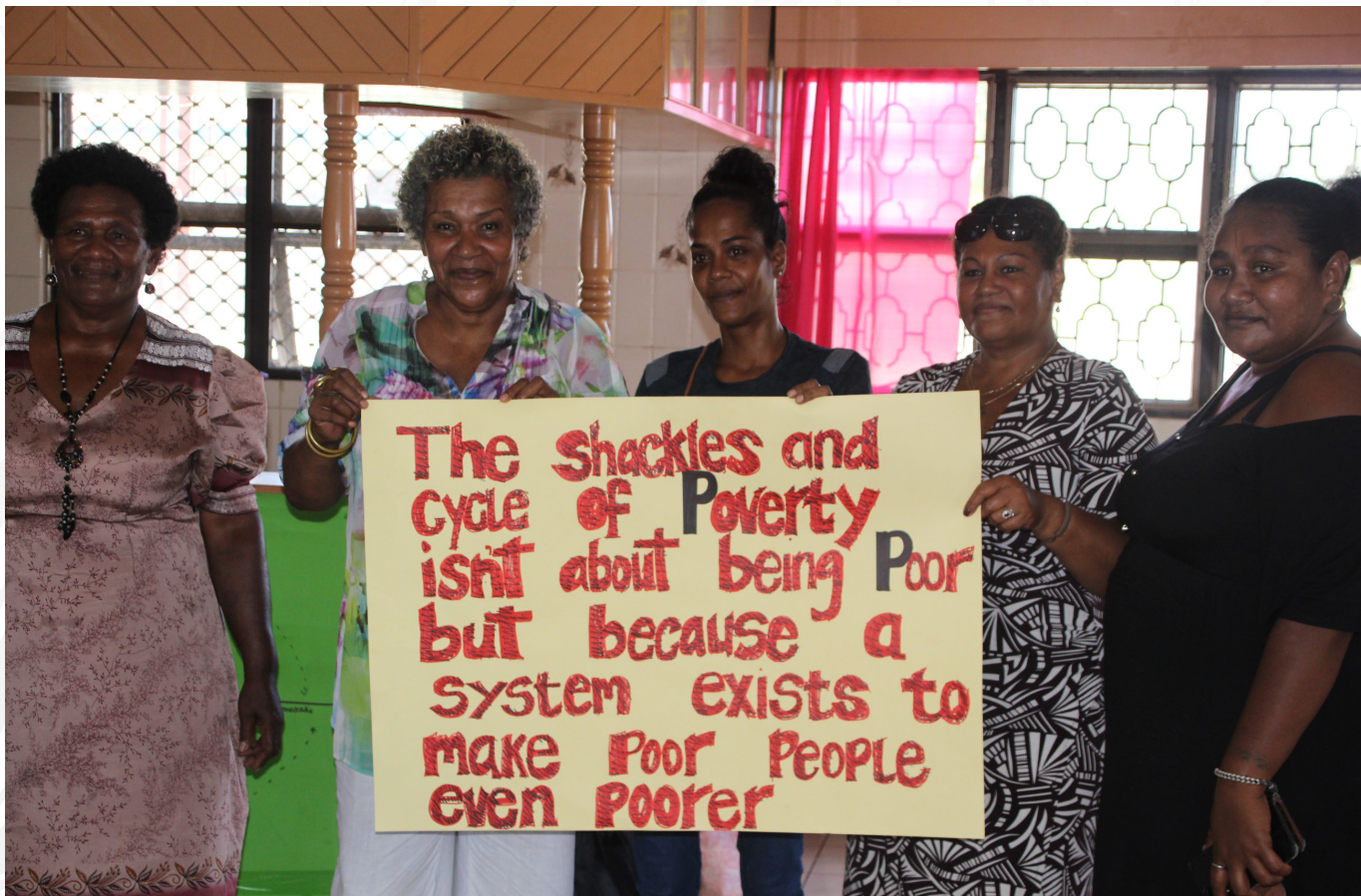
Recalling the long-agreed International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ECOSOC), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Education, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and subsequent follow-up protocols, is important. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in that Declaration can be fully realised. We recommend that all State parties urgently step up their efforts, including at CSW68, to eliminate poverty and improve the standard of living of all people.

Governments must pursue and strengthen measures to end poverty, paying particular attention to women, gender diverse people, children, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, older persons, and ensuring that policies are targeted at specific needs in urban informal settlements, rural and maritime areas. Policies must be adequately resourced and effectively implemented using a gender just, human rights-based approach and informed by civil society including groups of women and gender diverse people experiencing poverty. Beyond the nation-State, societies and the world as a whole must urgently move toward a new social

contract of equity, liberation, balance and justice, where all in the world including women and gender diverse people are free from poverty, and able to experience as individuals and collectives, in material and structural ways, their rights to social, economic, ecological and climate justice.

Initiatives such as South Feminist Futures, South Feminist Fiscal Justice Coalition, Gender and Trade Coalition, Gender and Tax Working Group, Regions Refocus, DAWN, Equidad, TWN, Focus on the Global South, FWCC, FWRM, APWLD, MENAFem, ETC Group, APMDD, Equality Insight/IWDA, Gender and Environment Data Alliance, Progressive International, AWID, Union of Pacific French Speaking Women (UFFO), DIVA for Equality and many others already address specific and significant gender data, analytical and praxis obstacles and gaps. They are available to strengthen heterodox evidence in order to accelerate action for universal human rights and social, economic, ecological and climate justice. Let us move quickly.

We are in a time of ecocide, and the survival of our species and others and the living Planet is at stake. This is not hyperbole but a grim reality, as the overshoot of six of nine planetary boundaries attest (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2023 ).



**There are 10 linked, key feminist demands that DIVA for Equality and the Poverty to Power Network and wider social movements are making, to enable key shifts in the way that Fiji works to end poverty and build economic justice. This is a quick first pass, non-exhaustive and we hope that this work is useful to feminist and heterodox economists even as DIVA for Equality complement all the stronger and deeper feminist responses bringing change to the lives of women and gender diverse people in Fiji, and broader. Let's work together to:**

1. Build and share feminist, heterodox resources on poverty and economic justice beyond those of mainstream International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and Bretton Woods Institutions and to ensure that CSOs, development institutions and governments have access to these resources including specific focus on feminist approaches to measuring, analysing and responding to poverty and economic injustice;

2. Frame poverty as a development justice and socio-economic, ecological and climate rights imperative that touches every aspect of life and insist on coherent reconfiguration of domestic and foreign law, policy and practice to reflect this reality. Socio-economic and environmental rights are women's rights, and universal human rights. Development justice means that we fulfil basic rights to food, water and sanitation, health, housing, education social provisioning and more, to be met by the State as public good, for all citizens;

3. Consistently and substantively include women and gender diverse people from urban poor, rural and maritime areas into local and national decision-making over every aspect of life including poverty eradication and economic justice concerns. This is not just necessary and ethical, it is smart. National development and human rights decisions will be coherent, strategic, balanced and the whole system will work better for all;

4. Be clear on the particular urgent context and conditions of women in Fiji and the Pacific that

influence their experiences of, and responses to poverty and economic injustice. This includes urgent work to end patriarchy including an end to all forms of sex and gender based violence, attention to women's basic needs and especially pro-poor housing, access to state services, liberation, safety and security in all areas and throughout their life cycles;

5. National policy response on the 5-6 Rs of unpaid care, domestic and communal work, (Recognition, Reduction, Redistribution, Reward, Representation and Reconfiguration) and women's right to adequate rest and leisure as much as their right to decent work. The work in small island states is as much about reconfiguring and reducing women's unpaid community service to kinship networks, villages and settlements, as it is about overwork in neoliberal capitalist-informed individual relationships and households. Change the way that society and State function, so that we make deliberate changes to work systems and toward gender-just initiatives of decent work, decent rest and leisure. Recognise the current situation of women's double and triple work burden; that a transitioning gender just state needs an overhaul of all policies and practices in order to address present inequalities, and quickly moves us toward gender justice, balance and freedom for everyone, including women and girls.

6. Ensure that national pro-poor and economic justice programs are intersectional, inclusive and designed by and for marginalised communities including LGBT and women with disabilities, and including feminist groups as partners with government and other institutions. Create conditions so that we move toward deep democracy, and that all aspects of development justice do not leave nor push anyone behind, especially women, children and gender diverse people.

7. Disrupt everyday patriarchy recognising that it is an unwritten, old, unequal system of control working to oppress women and gender non-binary people. It creates poverty, stigma and violence. Be part of the movement to end it. Resist any societal structure and process that tries to make women obedient to a system that centres men and elites and brings



development outcomes primarily for a minority. Examine iTaukei/Indigenous, Indo-Fijian, Rotuman, Rabi and other ethnically defined expectations and social roles for any gender-apartheid or gender-exploitative qualities. Fiji men can be public allies to women, and partners in change. Be clear on gender-just human rights values and principles. Decolonise minds and bodies and dismantle patriarchal and handmaiden ideas and behaviour. It's important to notice and stop this in ourselves and each other—handmaiden behaviour is where women and girls unknowingly support patriarchal systems that favour men and boys, norming it until it seems inevitable. Anyone who is not heterosexual or cis gendered, middle-class nor formally educated is left out of decision making, rejected and marginalised by state and society in ways that make change seem impossible. Society makes these ways of thinking and action seem inevitable through law, policy and practice. People follow societal rules without realising that another world of freedom, balance and justice is possible. So help to create conditions so that everyone can be themselves, and to be safe and free.

8. Prioritise grassroots women's access to knowledge, training and skillshare. State and society are largely not tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of grassroots women from high-poverty

backgrounds. This includes education, training and personal development, and work opportunities. Entire generations of poor women are trapped by commodified and technical systems that validate status and power, that invalidate their experiences, analysis and power of grassroots women-led groups and movements. We are taught from a young age that we have a certain value and place in society, and we must remain in that space. Those with elite power take up a large amount of space, and assume they are experts. This booklet challenges this idea, combining various sets of feminist knowledge and action, and insisting on women's validity, expertise and transformative qualities for both society and the State. We must be braver to stand up to colonial, patriarchal, masculinist and mainstream imperatives, and to create something different, for all.

This only happens through enhancement, recognition and validation of local knowledge, skills and practises that have been historically marginalised, to insist on their power and to deliberately create conditions for their recognition, use and conversion into lore, law, policy and practice. Women's experiences are shaped by various factors such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, and it is the role of the State and societies to reflect this in law, policy and practice. All accompaniment, education and training work



must include mental and physical health and wellbeing and be accessible and empowering in content, form and process. Women's bodies in Fiji are constantly under siege when living in the context of gender apartheid, patriarchy and misogyny. Trauma-Informed approaches recognise the impact of disrespect, overwork, violence, trauma and gender based and other discrimination on the lives of poor, marginalised women and gender diverse people. There must be specific strategies in place to ensure social provisioning at the level of the State and society. We need adequate and empathic funding and resources for civil society groups working on issues of gender, poverty and injustice. The government and UN system must push for system change that eliminates elitist gaps and barriers and creates an enabling environment for grassroots women to access knowledge, training and skills. We need to use a dual nexus approach to justice that on the one hand includes individual human rights, SRHR, SOGIESC, and social, economic, ecological and climate justice, and on the other hand always works on societal and State collectivism - in relationships, institutions, the Government, and wider between ourselves, other species and the living Planet.

9. Shift from 'Women's economic empowerment' to 'Women, gender and economic justice'. Economic justice requires system change to discriminatory social norms and socio-economic structures, laws, policies and practices from local to global. It means having the time and opportunity to engage in economic activities with adequate rest and leisure. We call for a focus on gender and women's human rights to economic resources and decision-making power, including equitable inheritance of, access to, use and control over, economic resources. It also includes a focus on climate and ecological justice, and addressing loss and damage.

10. Call for a Fiji Gender, Poverty and Economic Justice Summit in 2024 to discuss and plan the best approaches to this work for the country and to encourage regional engagement on poverty issues. To include financial, political and community representatives and feminist activists, including women and LGBTQIA+ people from urban poor, rural and maritime areas of Fiji. Fiji national development plans should be predicated on transparent and accountable outcomes of such a meeting as there are many data and analytical gaps, myths and presumptions about gender, poverty and economic justice in Fiji.

# References and Online Resources

Berik, G and Kongar, E. (Eds). The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics. Routledge, 2021.

Crawford, Joanne. IWDA. 'Gender and Poverty as a Feminist Foreign Policy Priority'. AFFPC ISSUE PAPER SERIES. ISSUE NUMBER 9. February 2023.

[https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/AFFPC\\_Issues\\_Paper\\_February\\_2023\\_Gender-and-Poverty-as-a-Feminist-Foreign-Policy-priority.pdf](https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/AFFPC_Issues_Paper_February_2023_Gender-and-Poverty-as-a-Feminist-Foreign-Policy-priority.pdf)

DIVA for Equality, 2019. Unjust, Unequal, Unstoppable: Fiji Lesbians, Bisexual Women, Transmen and Gender Non-conforming People Tipping the Scales Toward Justice:

<https://DIVAfiji.org/research/>

Diane Elson, 'Reducing Women's Poverty Through New Development Strategies'. Background Paper by Emeritus Professor Elson, University of Essex, UK, prepared for the CSW68 Expert Group Meeting. Accessed on 24 Jan 2024: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/elson.pdf>

Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), 2013, 'Somebody's life, Everybody's business! National Research on Women's Health and Life Experiences in Fiji'. <http://www.fijiwomen.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/National-Survey-Summary.pdf>

Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), Scoping Study: "Women & Ageing Scoping Study on Perceptions of Ageing among Women in Fiji. 2017.

<http://www.fwrm.org.fj/images/May-24-2017-Women--Ageing-Scoping-Study-on-Perceptions-of-Ageing-Among-Women-in-Fiji.pdf>

Gender and Trade Coalition, Information Sheet: <https://regionsrefocus.org/initiatives/gender-and-trade-coalition/>

Government of Fiji, Fiji Country Gender Assessment : Policy Briefs (2023): "Berik, G and Kongar, E. (Eds). The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics. Routledge, 2021." on page 66

IWDA, June 2023: <https://equalityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2-Pager-June23.pdf>

Jack, G., Plahe, J., & Wright, S. (2022). Development as freedom? Insights from a farmer-led sustainable agriculture non-governmental organisation in the Philippines. Human Relations, 75(10), 1875-1902.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267221090779>

Jefim Vogel, Gauthier Guerin, Daniel W. O'Neill, Julia K. Steinberger, Safeguarding livelihoods against reductions in economic output, Ecological Economics, Volume 215, 2024.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2023.107977>.

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary and Thesaurus: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

Muchhala, Bhumika. 18 April 2022. 'The IMF in Debt Restructuring, the Resurgence of Austerity, and the Urgency of Fiscal Justice'.

<http://www.cadm.org/The-IMF-in-Debt-Restructuring-the-Resurgence-of-Austerity-and-the-Urgency-of>

Nixon, Stephanie. 2019. The Coin Model of Privilege and Critical Allyship -Implications for Health. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-019-7884-9#Sec2>

Planng, N; Meo-Sewabu, et al. Violence against Children in Fiji: A Scoping Study Report. 2020. Govt of Fiji, USP, FNU, UNICEF and MFAT. Accessed 24 Jan 2024: <https://DIVAfiji.org/violence-against-children-in-fiji-a-scoping-study-report/>

Poverty to Power: DIVA for Equality feminist approaches to economic justice. <https://DIVAfiji.org/poverty-to-power-DIVA-for-equality-feminist-approaches-to-economic-justice>

Sen, Amartya. 'Development as freedom (1999).' The globalization and development reader: Perspectives on development and global change 525 (2014).

Stockholm Resilience Centre, 'Planetary Boundaries'. <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>

UNWomen, 2022. 'In focus: Sustainable Development Goal 5 - Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls'. 23 August, 2022: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/08/in-focus-sustainable-development-goal-5>

UNWomen, CSW68 Expert Meeting Report : csw68\_egm\_report\_final.pdf (unwomen.org)

WASH Reference Group. 'Submission: Australia Inquiry into strengthening Australia's relationship with countries in the Pacific Region.' Australia. March 2020.

DIVA Contacts:

Website: <https://DIVAfiji.org/>

Twitter: @DIVA4equality

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/DIVAFiji>

Frances Tawake, Poverty to Power Network Coordinator, DIVA for  
Equality: [frances@DIVAfiji.org](mailto:frances@DIVAfiji.org)

Noelene Nabulivou, Executive Director, DIVA for Equality:  
[noelene@DIVAfiji.org](mailto:noelene@DIVAfiji.org)

