

2. Women's media: Challenging the status quo

ABSTRACT

While there is a need to challenge mainstream media to improve their portrayal of women in contemporary Pacific society, there is also a need to counter factors affecting and inhibiting women's engagement with that media. This not only requires the incorporation of gender equality policies in mainstream media policy but by ensuring that women are able to develop, produce and distribute alternative information and communications. For such advocacy to be successful, this commentary argues for capacity building and training for young women and rural women to make the connection with policy makers through their local programme productions so they can challenge personal, institutional and systematic barriers to their development and empowerment.

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SINCE the mid-1970s, the deregulation of the Fiji media industry has given rise to several daily newspapers and publications, commercial radio and television and digital media in the 1990s. But throughout this period of media evolution, Fiji society has predominantly remained passive consumers rather than directors of the evolution of our media industry.

However, the engagement by women's civil society groups—whether with the mainstream media or the development of community or alternative media—has also been minimal. While the Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing held in 1995, was a watershed for media and ICT policy advocacy by the women's movement,¹ the connection between media and ICTs and women's empowerment has been slow to be made in the Pacific region. In fact, in 1994, before the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Pacific Island governments attended the South Pacific Commission's Triennial Meeting for Pacific Women's Ministries in Noumea, New Caledonia, 'women and media' issues were not recognised as a Pacific priority for inclusion in the Pacific

Platform for Action (PPA). Pacific Island governments failed to make the connection between advancing gender equality and the role of information and communication, especially the use and importance of media technologies.

Media advocacy since the Beijing Conference has been limited to women's human rights based organisations and those with the relevant institutional support whether donor funding support or even access to information and communication technology to be able to even engage with the mainstream media. Coupled with low media literacy levels, women's leaders and responses to media content have remained reactive, rather than responsive. Subsequently women, have continued to be considered also as passive consumers of media, rather than producers or as critical opinion makers.

In September 2000, femLINKPACIFIC: Media Initiatives for Women established itself to respond to the media status quo, advocating and implementing the concept of community media. The establishment of femLINKPACIFIC was also a response to the civil coup of May 2000.

The organisation recognised that Fiji's political history of internal conflicts² had not only brought about new social and economic problems but also highlighted the need for people and communities to be able to articulate their views on social and economic issues of national importance.

Through the development, production and distribution of a variety of community media initiatives (forms), femLINKPACIFIC has been working to provide alternative and additional viewpoints to the mainstream media coverage, drawn from women in civil society leadership particularly on issues related to the culture of peace and other issues of concern to Fiji women.

Since 2001, femLINKPACIFIC has produced a range of community-based videos and radio-programmes and, to intensify its work in the communities, now has its own mobile community radio unit (radio in suitcase). The target beneficiaries of this women's media initiative are rural and semi-urban women whose stories and issues do not make the news or even dissemination through NGO information networks.

The production process of these women's media initiatives themselves has taken on a participatory approach. Through initial consultation or pre-production planning with local communities or women's NGO partners, who are identified and portrayed as experts on their specific issues, to the production process, femLINKPACIFIC began taking the media to women in local communities. Initially working in community video forms. However,

the organisation also recognised that radio remained a critical media form for the women in the rural communities, as well as in neighbouring Pacific island countries, and something had to be done to also address the commercialisation of local radio stations.

The deregulation of the radio industry in the mid-1980s and public sector reforms from 1990 onwards resulted in a transformation of the radio field. Due to reduced government funding, radio automation has led to reduced staff numbers rather than a more efficient or public service-driven programming. The technical advances have produced more benefits for the commercial advertisers rather than better outreach or content for public information and communications. While ‘jukebox’ music formats are the main feature of commercial radio stations, public service broadcasting, which remains resourced through a contractual arrangement with the government, however, the public service broadcast format has continuously failed to reflect and uphold gender equality commitments by the state. It was of critical concern that neither the Department of Women nor the two biggest national women’s networks, the National Council of Women and the Soqosoqo Vakamarama had been consulted in the development of the public service broadcast content or ongoing review of programming quotas.

Subsequently, without consistent and progressive media initiatives and little participatory radio production initiatives, women, and their issues, remain relegated to the patriarchal context of recipes, entertainment news, and nothing too radical which may challenge the status quo reflecting the patriarchy of traditional decision-making structures which have continued to impede rather than assist women and young women, especially from the rural population and the poor, from communicating publicly on matters of concern to them.

Mobile radio station

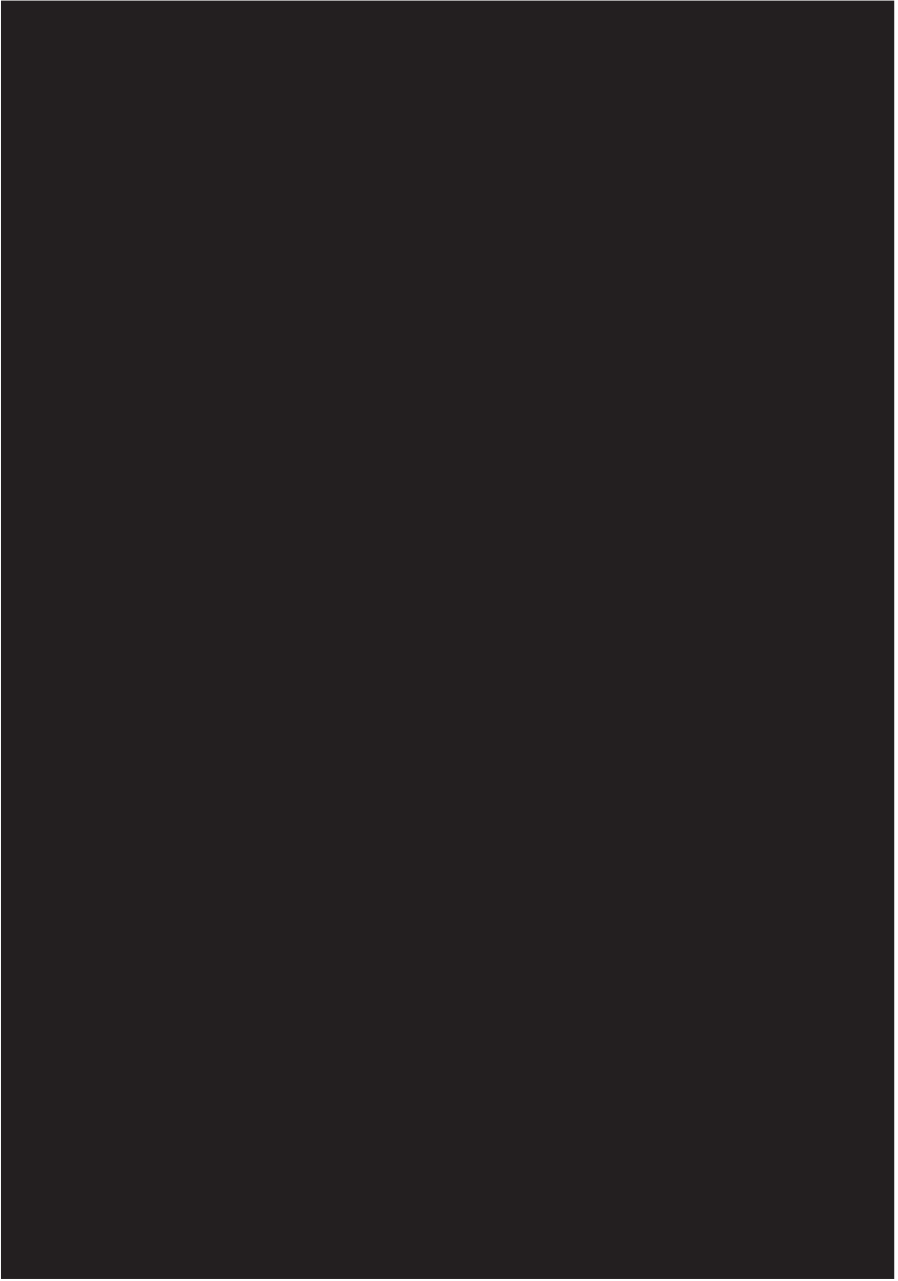
In response to this reality, femLINKPACIFIC has established a small mobile radio station, femTALK 89.2FM. This ‘radio in a suitcase’ travels out to women and their communities, offering women a ‘safe space’ to articulate and exchange their viewpoints. Using a low-power transmitter, femLINK-PACIFIC encourages women to speak to each other and with their communities. As a way to implement the station’s slogan, ‘Women speaking to women for peace’ the mobile broadcasts feature pre-produced audio reports and interviews recorded as live in local language and featuring an English

translation. The stories and interviews travel from one community to the next, sharing views and opinions rarely heard on mainstream radio (see Box on opposite page). femTALK 89.2FM is about community empowerment; it is about taking radio to women in their local communities; it is about enabling women and young women to have a voice share an opinion about a range of social, economic and political issues that will help bring about sustainable development and peace.

Each broadcast is an opportunity to promote the potential that exists within women leaders in local communities to identify critical development priorities as well as advise development programmes. The women who participate in each broadcast are free to express their opinion and belief, in a peaceful and inclusive manner. The radio broadcasts, are an opportunity of the women to be heard by local leaders from those in local government to the leadership of district and provincial councils, who remain predominantly men. During the broadcasts in the capital city, the broadcast of these interviews, also reaffirm the need for national decision making to be inclusive of rural women's realities.

The suitcase radio has also been the basis from which we can continue to advocate for the use of *appropriate and accessible information* and communication technology, for the role of women's media as a platform for policy advocacy and bringing about peaceful change for all. When people in our country able to share their opinion freely and safely, then we can say we are truly experiencing democracy.

In the lead up to the 2006 general elections in Fiji, using the suitcase radio,³ femLINKPACIFIC staged a series of focus group pre-broadcast consultations and radio broadcasts in three rural communities, to assist women in these communities articulate their development priorities and vision statements for the future of the country during the elections. This community media initiative, *Not just sweet talk*, also served as an important platform to once again highlight the marginalisation of women's opinions and representation from the mainstream political processes and decision making in Fiji. Interviews with several of the 25 women candidates showed that, even within the many political parties, women remain at the periphery of decision making and there is an urgent need to review and reform electoral and other decision making forums to provide a more democratic space for the participation of women, young women and other marginalised groups.⁴



These interviews have proven to be a source of valuable documentation, to influence and inform programmes to increase women's participation in the local and national political sphere, as they provide strong anecdotal evidence of the experiences of women's political participation and attempts to offer political commentary to the mainstream media. This is sad proof of women's continued marginalisation from mainstream political debate and formal decision making spheres.

By working in partnership with NGO, government and regional partners who are also working with grassroots women, femLINKPACIFIC is able to transform the radio broadcast content into policy advocacy statements to show how media can be used to assist in the advancement of gender equality.

Seven years on

After conducting more than 40 women's weekend broadcasts in Suva, 11 rural broadcasts in Fiji, producing 12 community videos, more than 36 monthly Enews bulletins in addition to 12 editions of our regional and national publication femTALK and numerous national and regional media and policy action alerts, femLINKPACIFIC works at a range of levels to contribute to bringing about a change in the political and decision making sphere in Fiji and in the Pacific Island region.

From documentation within communities—to strengthening local networking and partnerships—and to serve as a channel of communication to policy makers as well as the mainstream media and other women and peace networks; we have been able to increase the visibility of Pacific women's experiences from national to international level—by being an available women's, peace-based media outlet or clearing house.

In Fiji, we are now working to establish a national community radio network, to build on our pilot initiatives and to expand our network of rural correspondents who are being equipped and resourced to remain a critical link between our Suva based community media centre and rural communities.

At a regional level, we are also working to strengthen our regional women's media network on Women, Peace and Human Security with our partners who include the Buka (Bougainville) based non-government organisation Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency, Vois Blong Mere Solomon and the Legal Literacy Project of the Catholic Women's League in Tonga.

Our rural and regional network continues to use appropriate ICTs to

receive and transmit information from Suva to New York to London to ensure relevant agencies and partners are aware of the developments on the ground, in our fragile states.

We have further recognised that our media initiatives also have the potential to inform and enable gender inclusive reconciliation programmes, while also serving as an information and communication network for initiatives as well as for the early detection of conflict indicators; community radio, can be safe, trusted or respected channels of information for a range of stakeholders, especially women, who remain sidelined from mainstream media content.

The policy link

So how do we expand the recognition and support needed for appropriate media forms to educate and empower local communities, for peace and security?

We want more people, in particular women, to know about and realise that they have a right to share in decision making, to have a say in the way they want the journey back to parliamentary democracy to be managed and realised. We cannot rely on the corporate media to support such initiatives, even when public service broadcasting forms may still exist. The reality is—public sector reform and corporatisation had handed power to advertisers to dictate where radio goes, even though radio remains critical for our communities on the islands. There has become been a total disconnection. People say: ‘Oh, but there’s talk-back radio!’ But if you are a woman living on an island far removed from the capital city, you can’t afford that extra charge on your telephone bill.

Greater emphasis is needed, therefore, to expand the initial recognition of the potential of community radio—in the Digital Strategy of the Pacific Plan for strengthening regional cooperation and integration.⁵

If empowerment is about challenging social norms, ensuring the right shift towards equalizing power relations as well as enabling voice and expressions to one’s experiences and being able to actively claim one’s rights, then what does this all mean to women in rural communities in our Pacific Island Region where the basic necessities of life remain unfulfilled?

What can political empowerment for women through ICTs mean for women who still remain burdened because they have no electricity? Or, to hear even the radio, means having sufficient batteries, which cost money and,

to tune in, there still has to be a decent radio reception. What if, for women, they also still have to negotiate with the men in the household or community, to be able to sit in on the family or communal listening?

These questions are posed when trying to decipher the implications of ICTs for women in a Pacific island country such as Fiji. What does it mean to have ICT access when there is no piped clean water despite lots of running streams children still have no bridge to cross over to get to school? Where the roads are so bad that even three-ton trucks refuse to transport villagers to town with their goods during the rainy season, and, because these roads are impassable during a medical emergency, this can lead to the death of a woman or child?

What do ICT innovations for poverty reduction mean in circumstances where consecutive governments have not heard villagers' or communities' calls for much needed infrastructure assistance and where consequently, every week, villages have to struggle to get cash crops to the market in the capital city in time and have to hope fair market prices will ensure much needed cash for their children's school expenses?

Would it help if the local health centre which serves the seven surrounding villages had a computer linked to the Ministry of Health, so that the community could access proper medical advice and pharmaceutical supplies? Or if, through a computer, the Agricultural Marketing Authority could contact villagers and assist with the arduous task and weekly costs of getting goods to the capital city more than 100 km away?

These issues have relevance for considering ICTs and their role in women's empowerment and gender equality. What does 'using ICT for gender equality' mean if women do not have access to information on ICT issues from women's civil society groups who advocate women's human rights and gender equality in development in the capital city, but cannot assist village women to negotiate for a stronger presence in district and village meetings?

According to the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, all stakeholders—from national ICT advisory committees, regional organisations and the donor community need to play a role in ensuring that ICT policies and plans are well supported and are relevant to all sectors of the community. 'When you get right down to it, this sector is, after all, about empowerment.'⁶ This recognition at a political level is critical, especially for women and civil society groups, who will need to constantly remind policy

makers that these promises of empowerment through ICTs have been made. It is particularly important for women who are still struggling to take their rightful place as legitimate stakeholders to ensure that whatever technology and media forms are used, will meet the needs of not only the private sector, information-technology professionals, the national planning offices, but also the needs of women, the majority of whom are in rural communities, persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups.

We need to overcome political rhetoric but ensure we get the practical, policy and regulatory assistance needed to build on the progress we have made already in establishing community-centred media and information networks and not be subsumed by a political process which is defined by regional bureaucracy and private sector interests rather than the realities of Pacific Island communities. Women need to ensure true equity in Pacific islands' ICT developments. Some of the equity issues are ensuring that rural-based communities have equitable access to, and participation in, the decision making on ICT developments. But how is this possible when they are not invited to the planning meetings?

Women's movements around the world favour a communications' system based on democratic principles, which limits corporate monopolies in telecommunications. Women have also worked towards information and communication societies where development is focused on fundamental human needs and clear social, cultural, economic, and environmental goals, and where priority is given to the alleviation of poverty and other inequalities in a way that is environmentally sustainable. Women have committed themselves to taking a gendered approach to all concerns, including information and communication.

Despite these global advances, the majority of Pacific Island women remain under-represented in all ICT decision-making structures in their countries and in regional organisations. Within the Pacific Island region, very few women's civil society groups are advocating for the need for some form of control in the communication and in ICT fields to ensure that the resources and benefits of the information and communication society are distributed equally among men and women.

What the Pacific needs is a diverse and pluralistic media that will enable communities, especially women in their communities, to freely address their critical areas of concern is through public, commercial and community media forms, is what is needed in the Pacific.

Conclusion

Women's participation in and access to all forms of media in the Pacific region must be urgently addressed if Pacific women are to avoid being sidelined from recent developments in the mass media industry. It is important to prevent this to ensure women's perspectives on the media and ICTs are heard at all levels of decision-making and implementation of ICT policies.

Based on femLINKPACIFIC experiences, while there is a need to challenge the existing roles and responsibilities of the mainstream media to improve their portrayal of women in contemporary Pacific society, there is also a need to counter factors affecting and inhibiting women's engagement with the media. This not only requires the incorporation of gender equality policies in mainstream media policy but, more importantly, by ensuring women themselves are able to develop, produce and distribute alternative information and communications—particularly community media forms. This means women in the Pacific Island region have an opportunity to communicate their needs in an effective way.

For this advocacy to be successful, it needs to start with capacity building and training for young women and rural women to make the connection with the policy makers through their local programme productions so that women and their communities challenge existing personal, institutional and systematic barriers to their development and empowerment.

Community based empowerment training programmes that also include the provision of appropriate communication tools will enhance the democratisation of existing formal decision-making structures. This will enable women to inform and lobby for their development needs, whether these be demands of governments to address local infrastructure needs, provide better medical services or through contributing to discussions on constitutional and human rights issues.

Fiji, as well as the broader Pacific women's movement, also needs to be challenged and reminded that for those with access to the use of email and internet, there are hundreds of other women on the other side of the digital divide without access to these technologies or even simpler forms of media and communications, who continue to be marginalised. There is an urgent need for Pacific women to discuss how we can better work together to address the existing ICT gaps facing women in the communities in which we work. After all, we must also review how we ensure there is the sharing

of information power in new and innovative ways, especially between urban and rural women.

In the Pacific, we need to get serious about investing in appropriate ICT infrastructure to make the new technologies work for development, enabling all citizens to participate and benefit from the global developments in that sector. By engendering the Pacific regional ICT policy, Pacific Island governments can further ensure that they are enabling and increasing women's access to all forms of media—traditional, community and new.

Notes

1. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action called for: 'Increase in participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication.' It also called for the promotion of 'a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media'.
2. Fiji became independent in 1970. In 1987, it experienced the first coup in the Pacific region, when an elected government was replaced on the grounds did not represent indigenous Fijian interests. Over the years, Fiji reviewed its constitution and reached a consensus on a new constitution in 1997. Following elections in 1999, a Labour government was elected and served for a year led by Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry, before being removed by another coup in 2000. Instability, increased poverty, state and non-state violence and violence against women, are some of the current conditions.
3. The suitcase radio broadcasts on 89.2FM using a 100 watt transmitter.
4. femTALK ENews bulletins 6, 7, 8—*Not Just Sweet Talk* special bulletins.
5. The Pacific Plan is a regional plan being coordinated by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. There has been limited engagement with civil society, especially at community level. See www.pacificplan.org
6. Speech by Greg Urwin, Secretary General, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Pacific Islands ICT Ministerial Meeting, 30 March 2006.

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