

Making (Radio) in the P Waves Pacific

Doreen Sam is the principal information officer of the Solomon Islands Women's Information Communication Network or SIWNET. She visited the Philippines last year to participate in a workshop on women's resource and information center organized by Isis International-Manila. Speaking with her, **Irene Chia** discovered how women are making good use of radio in the Solomons, a country composed of six main islands and a hundred smaller ones. Women make up a third of the Solomons' 300,000 population. Only 17 percent of women are literate.



Doreen Sam: Steering SIWNET's wheel.

Irene Chia: In the Solomon Islands, the Women's Information Communication Network is doing great work for the communication and information needs of women. But, tell us, how did SIWNET start?

Doreen Sam: The demand for information for women in the Pacific has always been high but the idea for setting up a resource center did not come until after a seminar on the management of a women's information center. After this workshop, we saw that was important to have more women's information centers. There is so much information received from women's groups but they are not passed on to other women's organizations who are left unaware of the developments that are going on in the national, regional and international spheres. That was how SIWNET started in 1990.

The organization is governed by women representatives of women's organizations in the Solomon Islands and they give us, the staff, a lot of encouragement.

In the main, SIWNET produces programs for women, one of which is radio.



Starting them young: Doreen's children, left and middle, and niece spend weekends at SIWNET.



Josephine Teakeni, left, is SIWNET's latest addition. She joins SIWNET as reaserch officer.

Through the radio program, we cover a lot of issues which are affecting women in the Solomon Islands. We interview women on the progress of their work in their respective organizations.

Q: How active is the women's movement in the Solomons?

A: We have one government women's organization which is the organizing arm of the Women's Development Division. We have church-based women's groups, the Young Women's Christian Association, the National Council of Women, and other small NGOs.

I've been working with women for 10 years now and I know most of them. That's why when I became the principal information officer of SIWNET, I easily developed my contacts in the other national information offices.

Q: How does SIWNET use radio to reach out and organize women?

A: The women's radio programs, to me, are very effective in reaching out to women. However, some women may not have a transistor radio and batteries are costly.

But SIWNET has a Women's Radio Development Spot. It is a 60-second jingle broadcast on radio. They're really not songs but messages. We would like to create awareness on issues in very short messages through jingles or "development spots" broadcast during peak time over the national radio.

The jingles are often about issues like domestic violence and other critical areas in the Global Platform of Action. We take up just one issue at a time, say for example education. There are so many girls dropping out from school. What are we going to do to eliminate this problem? In the future, we shall also be covering health and population.

We also have a half-hour, once-a-week radio program and for that I do the interviews. My background is broadcasting and I interview women about nearly all issues that affect them. I also write the scripts, and produce the program.

When I do interviews, I ask questions on behalf of women. For instance, if I do not know so much about the law I will ask

my interviewee questions that other women in the rural areas might like to ask also.

The radio program covers a lot of issues that we think women need to be aware of, issues that range from health and nutrition, population, domestic violence, the environment, wife-beating, alcoholism, education and many more.

But one important issue is agriculture. We did a program on it and it made me see that most women in the rural areas are subsistence farmers and it is important for them to gain some knowledge and skills on the techniques and methodologies of growing and maintaining their plots.

Another important concern is education. In the Solomons, girls are outnumbered in secondary school. The Ministry of Education says one of the problems is the lack of dormitories or facilities that would enable them to enrol more secondary level school girls. There are so many girls who are school drop-outs in the primary level and who therefore lose the chance to get a good education. Although there are churches and some NGOs that have established vocational training schools, they can only accommodate a small number. The rest would be left at home.

At the moment, we are also trying to update women on the Beijing conference. Most of the women in the Solomons were not even aware of this United Nations Conference on Women and we use the radio program to provide them with information.

We also attended the PeaceSat conference of women in the Pacific and broadcast the preparatory activities for women.

PeaceSat is a kind of network. On the satellite link, we will be in Honiara,

the Solomons' capital and there will be someone in Fiji, and so on. All the other participating countries will be sitting in their own respective countries and we will link through this PeaceSat or peace satellite.

So, as you can see, the radio program is a vital service to the women of the Solomons. It costs a lot of money but it is the only radio program for women in the country and it provides women the opportunity to express opinions and views on issues or problems that they face.

That is why it is really a good thing that the program is broadcast over the national radio station. And this year, we are very fortunate that the government is funding it.

Apart from government, SIWNET also receives support from other NGOs and foreign donors. I tried and succeeded in getting funds to continue the program. That's a great success for us.

Q: Can you tell us more about the other programs of SIWNET?

A: SIWNET'S other program is the Women's Resource Center. As I said, at the moment, I am the only one working for SIWNET but we're thinking of getting another person when I come home to specifically work at the resource center.



Salei Rukasi, participant in the SIWNET workshop on resource center, sharing a laugh with Rhona Bautista, Isis International-Manila's librarian and workshop trainer.

We're trying to establish this resource center and one of my intentions in coming to the Philippines is to see how the Isis resource center is set up.

But we have very limited materials at the moment. Still, consultants and students have been using our center to collect information on women.

We are also thinking of publishing a women's photojournal for which we have already sought funds. The photo-journal will be used for educating women who live in the islands far from Honiara.

You see, only a third of our population are women and most of them live in the provinces and are engaged in subsistence farming. These women have missed out on a lot of activities that have been carried out at the national level. Based on reports, only 17 percent of women in the Solomon Islands are literate. That's why we thought of publishing a journal full of photos with captions to explain the pictures.

Q: Is SIWNET affiliated with any larger organization?

A: SIWNET has affiliations with other regional organizations like the Pacific News Association (PNA). Our affiliation with PNA will help us not only train the staff but also develop the radio program, and produce a better newsletter. We will have access to training which is beneficial to us. Through the PNA, we have set up the Black Women Network which links other women journalists in other Pacific countries. Hopefully, we will benefit from the training that they have.

We are also affiliated with the Pacific Broadcasting Association (PBA) and a member of the Media Association of the Solomon Islands (MASI), the local media association.

SIWNET also runs Communications Training Workshops for women to help them acquire the basic skills of news writing. These training will greatly assist rural women to compile or write news stories which may be written in their own dialect and then translated into English

which will then help us get to know what's going on in the provinces.

Actually, most women can write, but they fear people might laugh at their grammar. That's a big problem we have in the Solomons and we don't want that kind of thinking to flourish, especially among women. As long as we can understand what they are trying to say, that's it. We've conducted the workshops with our local church women's groups and the response was really good.

Also, given the geographical set-up of the Solomons, to be able to reach out, we need to tour the provinces. These touring programs help us reach out to women who live in very isolated and very far islands. I interview women when I go on tour. I ask them what their daily life is like, what their problems are, what their activities are and how they are surviving.

Q: What about theater? Have you tried theater?

A: Yes, we've tried drama when we went on tour on the issue of domestic violence. The women were really emotional because domestic violence is not openly discussed. It's a very sensitive



The Women's Development Division of the Solomon Island's Ministry of Youth, Sports, Women and Recreation were active participants of SIWNET's resource center workshop.



Hands-on. There's no better way to learn.

issue and our country is culturally diverse. The problems that contribute to domestic violence differ from island to island. We have so many cultures so we have to be very careful because what may be all right in some islands may be offending in others.

I find that drama is one of the more effective ways to get messages across to women. Dramatizing domestic violence has a strong effect on the women and men listening. Soap operas, drama, and role playing have similar effects.

We have also tried songs during our communications training workshop. The participants were able to choose a topic like nutrition and they came up with some songs. One was about the taro or cassava, which is good food. If you eat it with rice or fish or some kind of vegetable, it is nutritious. Songs really had an effect on the women listening. These are the alternative forms that are very effective.

Q: What do you think is the impact of your work for the last five years on women?

A: I think we have progressed very well in the last five years. At the beginning of the project, we didn't have consist-

ent funding. I didn't get paid from September 1992 to June 1993. But I see the importance of having this women's program.

The women's radio program, it is me, it is in me. Just because we don't have funding doesn't mean we have to stop a very effective program for women. I don't want it to fall apart and I believe we can do it.

I have met challenges in my job but I worked my way through. We are very happy that we received funding from local and overseas organizations and that the government is now showing interest in funding our radio program. That is a great achievement for us. We also have an additional staff coming and additional equipment.

Over the years, we received feedback that were both encouraging and discouraging. But the negative ones only make me more determined to work. Sometimes it's all "oh, your project will only last for this year." That makes me work all the more and I get the result that I want.

I am glad to say that women like our radio program very much. The day after an airing, some women will usually ring me up and say that they liked the program. Sometimes, I meet them on the road and they say "oh, that was a very good program last night. I liked it."

Q: So this is what keeps you going?

A: Yes. You see, before SIWNET, I was a broadcaster, an announcer and a disk jockey. I did women's programs mainly. But I left the broadcasting station and I joined the seminars of the National Council of Women. I was the communications officer at that time, responsible for the women's radio program. Then I continued with SIWNET.

In the 10 years that I've worked with women, I've had easy times and hard times. Sometimes women are our own enemies but that won't stop me from my work. When you continue to work despite pressures, in the end, you fulfill a goal.)