

Spaces of Our Own

By Sharon Bhagwan Rolls

Daily, we consume stories of conflict from all over the world. But more and more, it seems media is selling us nothing else but conflict. International media treat us to their own perspectives on the tides of internal and external conflicts, and the social and economic impact of such conflicts, without their historical context or the benefit of local analysis. Local media, meantime, focuses on the antics of “honourable” members of parliament, echoing not only their political rhetoric but also highly racist remarks that amplify their countries’ social instability. Whatever happened to the stories of conflict resolution, peace-building initiatives and the promotion of racial tolerance, goodwill and understanding?

Where are the stories of peace? Peace is not just about the absence of war. Peace is about our lives at home and in our communities.

The document “Building a Women’s Peace Agenda,” which highlights the discussions at the May 1999 Hague Appeal for Peace Conference, points out the innovative peace and human rights information and communication strategies initiated by women in conflict situations over the years to provide an ‘additional viewpoint’ to that of mainstream media. For example, videos were used to mediate between the African National Congress and Inkatha Freedom Party in South Africa, while the women of Sri Lanka have used multimedia and

interpersonal communication in finding a solution to the civil war that has claimed so many lives over nearly two decades.

How can we make sure that the stories of peace, which take into account the post-conflict development needs of the country, find their way into our homes, communities, and society? One can not help ask what happened to the tremendous investments of government agencies and other development groups promoting media training and supporting media freedom in providing a balanced perspective, whether on the issue of health, environment, gender, etc. Such investments should also clarify the link between women’s peace initiatives and the country’s develop-

ment. But maybe Conflict sells and Peace does not.

The realisation that the time has come for us to rely not only on mainstream media to tell our stories is the reason for fem’LINKpacific (Media Initiatives for Women) in Fiji.

Communicating a Culture of Peace

fem’LINKpacific was founded in September 2000, shortly after the country was again lurched into another crisis—the illegal overthrow of an elected government. The *coup d’état* took place only 13 years after a similar takeover, twice in 1987. The coups of 1987, however, were led by a military man, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, while that of May 2000 was by a civilian—a failed businessman, George Speight, who held Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and 17 other hostages in the parliament complex for 56 days. Among the demands of Speight and his followers was that Fiji’s constitution be replaced so that Indo-Fijians (descendants of indentured labourers taken to Fiji from India in the colonial period) would be excluded from the government. The takeover triggered rioting and looting in the streets of the capital, Suva, which distracted the police and highlighted that all was not well. As the hostage crisis progressed, the violence spread to rural settlements outside Suva, and we became aware of the fear being injected into our

communities, especially in light of the persecution and subsequent displacement of farmers from Dawasamu and Mauniweni.

Women were instrumental in maintaining a degree of calm and infusing hope to the people during those tense weeks. The National Council of Women-Fiji issued our first media statement denouncing the coup the next day, Saturday May 20th and then mobilised the network of women's groups in Suva to gather for a Peace and Prayer Vigil the following day. From Sunday May 21st, a multiethnic group of women held a daily vigil throughout the 56-day hostage crisis. True, we were not without our own tensions and fears, though this was insignificant compared with the strength generated by the women's coming together daily. The Mothers in White who gathered to pray for the hostages and the women who wrote letters of support multiplied hope upon hope.

Coordinating the peace vigil put me in touch with media organisations, local and international. I was not surprised that while the local dailies carried our media releases, it was the international media that was drawn to look behind the scenes of the peace vigil. In doing so, they found a window to women-in-community perspective of the crisis. On the other hand, many of the local media practitioners saw in the vigil access to the hostages who, as they were released, joined the women in solidarity. It became clear that there was a need for women's own community-

One of the inspiring actions during the May 2000 crisis was the solidarity of women's groups in holding together the dreams and hopes of our country. In organising daily prayer vigils, women came together, in a natural response, unified as wives, mothers and daughters of Fiji.... They gave life to our shared values at a time when many social and religious institutions were silent. They communicated a vision of peace, unity, justice and reconciliation for our country. It was also an acknowledgement that as mothers, caregivers and nurturers, women can make a valuable contribution to improve the well being of [their] family, community and country.

from "Mothers in Dialogue," a fem'LINKpacific community video produced for the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy, September 2001

media initiatives that would tell our stories.

The Agenda in the Aftermath

fem'LINKpacific came to be out of a desire to provide not just an alternative viewpoint, but an *additional* viewpoint, to the coverage of issues by the mainstream media. It should be added that fem'LINKpacific is concerned not only with news coverage but also with radio and television programme productions and broadcasts, promotional campaigns and advertising/marketing. Since it was established, fem'LINKpacific has documented and produced a range of community-based productions to share its perspective and that of partner non-government organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs).

The idea of a fem'LINKpacific was inspired by the call to action to NGOs of the strategic objectives found in Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action: (1) to increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision making in and through the media and new technologies; and (2) to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. It was also inspired by UN Security Council Resolution 1325, where global leaders acknowledged the urgency of bringing women into peace building, and conflict prevention and resolution. The resolution advocates that women be assigned places at the peace-negotiating table and as key negotiators in all levels of conflict resolution.



Charlie Sacceda/AsiaPix

Giving voice to peace-builders at regional level. Women from Fiji, Vanuatu, PNG and Solomon Islands came together in Fiji last October 2001 at the Melanesian round table consultation on Women, Peace and Security that was organised by UNIFEM Pacific. The author is in the front row, extreme right of frame.

While lobbying the media industry to develop people-centred and gender-mainstream policies for increased accountability to their audience, we at fem'LINKpacific believe we should continue to pursue our own initiatives, which enables us to be engaged with community women's groups, in particular, to 'get their take' on the issues and have their stories heard, rather than relying on mainstream media for the projection of our position on the various issues.

Since last year, fem'LINKpacific has engaged partner CSOs and NGOs in "best utilising the media," including assisting Fiji Media Watch in May 2001 in their "Steering Fiji Back to Democracy" workshops in Suva and Lautoka. These workshops assembled journalists, journalism students and NGOs/CSOs in a weeklong consultation on the issue of

covering a General Election, in particular the first General Election that followed the May 2000 crisis. The workshops served as an opportunity for dialogue between the various participants (and for many journalists, an opportunity to speak out their feelings on covering the crisis), while articulating the perspectives of NGOs/CSOs on the country's political situation. However, some media executives paid no mind to the activity while others even questioned whether it was the media's role to advocate and promote peace and democracy! (*Workshop reports are available from Fiji Media Watch. Please contact Father Larry Hannan at E-mail: <fmwatch@is.com.fj>.*)

As Secretary of the National Council of Women Fiji, I have also been involved in organising and facilitating fem'LINKpacific's Media Mainstreaming Initiative, which in-

cluded two training programmes for women NGO leaders, the youth and government stakeholders, gave an overview of the opportunities available for communicating issues and stories—whether in the form of a television magazine segment or a radio campaign. Such investments in training gender and peace advocates are imperative.

The pressing agenda includes:

- ◆ to understand the status of the media industry today;
- ◆ to understand the policies governing decision-making as part of the origins of the various outputs of the media industry today;
- ◆ to facilitate dialogues with media practitioners "to break down" present-day barriers;
- ◆ to create an enabling media environment;
- ◆ to formulate a platform that lays the foundation of working together for fair and balanced coverage of issues while recognising the commercial objectives of the media industry; and
- ◆ to work collectively for the protection of human rights, including a free and fair media, and the access to information.

Collective effort is critical in light of the implications of forthcoming debates in parliament on two important bills, the Media Bill and the Freedom of Information Bill.

"The Media Bill historically follows on to other pieces of legislation, but the first focus of the Bill is to establish an independent body to oversee the quality of the print and broad-

cast media,” Information Minister Josefa Vosanibola said to the *Daily Post* in July.

If the Media Bill is enacted, what happens to the current Fiji Media Council, which was an initiative of the media organisations themselves? How will the legislation affect our rights as users and consumers of media? Will the media industry forge alliances with civil society groups to strengthen the call for a free and fair media?

Community Media Initiatives

fem’LINKpacific has turned out several interviews and productions toward strengthening our community media, including our community video series “fem’TALK.”

While developing, producing and distributing our community videos, we are also able to establish linkages with the community and persuade the women to share their stories on our four issues:

- ◆ the role of women in peace and security;
- ◆ youth concerns;
- ◆ poverty from a social justice perspective, especially in the context of Fiji’s post-conflict stage; and
- ◆ community-based understanding of the principles of human rights, good governance and democracy.

Thus, the productions are able to feature not only the “gender experts” but also women from the urban and rural communities (including village settlements).

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In undertaking its own media initiatives, fem’LINKpacific seeks to:

- ◆ assist women in understanding their social, political and civil rights and how the principles of human rights impact on their daily lives;
- ◆ provide women’s groups around Fiji with an advocacy and awareness tool in devising appropriate strategies in addressing their concerns and problems;
- ◆ share women’s concerns with government and civil society for a better appreciation of the women’s movement and the women’s peace movement; and
- ◆ contribute to the process of reconciliation as women share their stories and experiences in an effort to overcome the barriers that lead to racial intolerance.

So far, the community videos are distributed to more than 50 women’s groups and civil society organisations.

fem’LINKpacific also circulates video kits to the local mainstream media to suggest to them women-centred “leads” they could expand on. We are also expanding the fem’TALK

viewing guide that accompanies each video release with the hope that this evolves into a community-based magazine.

Last October 2001, UNIFEM Pacific convened a round-table meeting on the topic “Women, Peace and Security” in Melanesia. The participants were challenged to deconstruct the myth that when men speak on an issue, it is more readily accepted, and to answer the questions: (1) What does the myth mean for us as women? and (2) What does it say about our status in society?

The meeting galvanised the logic of women’s participation in peace negotiations and in influencing the peace process. As the most ardent advocates for peace, we need to challenge the patriarchal and inhibiting factors of the mainstream media that do not provide us with the airtime, space or access to technology to tell our stories. We must claim our own voices so that the message we convey is accepted and valued. Whether this requires continued engagement with the media industry or the development of our own media, we must have our stories heard. ?

Sharon Bhagwan Rolls is a founding member and current Coordinator (producer and director) of fem’LINKpacific: Media Initiatives for Women. Her work with the media industry began in 1986, the same year she became involved in women’s issues as a volunteer of the Young Women’s Christian Association. She was re-elected to the position of Secretary of the National Council of Women-Fiji in April this year.