

Rural Women

- Food Sovereignty
- Conflict
- Peace



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"I cannot feed my family with mats" a rural woman leader told me as we discussed the connection between rural women's economic and food security. She attends our monthly 1325 network meetings and represents women from her village close to 100 km from the main town centre. She like many other women craves for financial security – savings accounts more than just micro credit. Rural young women have shared how they have travelled to and from school on an empty stomach. Market vendors regularly share the cost of food production and food sales as they strive to earn cash for their families.

"Freedom from want and freedom from fear" is central to women's peace and human security and integral to ensuring holistic responses to the CSW theme.

In addition the multiple realities of rural women in Pacific need to be addressed within a human rights framework which are central to human security. Conflicts have not only caused economic upheaval and hardship they have also been created by them. Natural resource exploitation has created economies of war in which those involved in waging it use conflict to gain control of land, forests and other resources to exploit for profit.

During peace negotiations when allocation and use of natural resources are discussed, women and their concerns are often excluded.

How are they able to define their food security?
Including in the context of natural disasters?

How can they ensure that the environmental impact of conflict is incorporated into post conflict

reconstruction, including addressing the unexploded remnants of war, toxic pollutants and lead contamination if they are not at the Peace Table?

Additionally unabated human security risks in the Pacific including climate change risks are not only inextricably linked to food security but also are linked to increase violent conflict which requires greater efforts by the UN and international community to respond more effectively.

In defining peace and security it is critical that we redefine and transform patriarchal structures of decision-making.

Women in the Pacific have continued to remind government that bombs, guns and landmines will not remove the threat of natural disasters: tsunamis, hurricane, flood, drought, or epidemic that are the real security threats of our time along with environmental degradation and finite resource exploitation.

We are also contributing to the development of a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security to use 1325 as a transformation tool, to transform notions of peace and security and institutions and ensuring prevention and protection, as well as women's participation at the Peace Table where women make a difference for the whole of society.

To ensure that we build back better

When women are empowered to participate in society they are more likely to live lives free from violence, so it is crucial they be actively included in decisions around security needs.

It is time that member states integrate women's human rights commitments and peace into development agendas because a development agenda which invests in women is enabling them to participate in decision making particularly to address new and emerging threats to Peace in the Pacific including climate change, tensions over access to water, land and other diminishing resources, with implications for food security.

The human security of rural women is too often undermined by sexual violence, limited access

to land, no freedom of movement and forced displacement.

Enabling the potential of rural women to improve their human security through active involvement within policy processes and political decision-making is a precondition for achieving lasting peace and security

Gender-sensitive security measures improve societal participation and economic empowerment of rural women, including in agriculture and food production.

Rural women as active agents in security decision-making processes ultimately contribute to the general prevention of conflict and peace building.

This presentation is based on FemLINKPACIFIC's work through our rural and regional women's media and policy network (Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Bougainville – Papua New Guinea) which strives to support the collective call to empower women and communities so that they can share in decision-making for equality, appropriate development, security and peace.

Common experiences and visions are drawn from rural centres in Fiji, the outer islands and provinces in the Solomon Islands, remote communities still rebuilding their lives following the war in Bougainville and village communities in Tonga share a common thread - we have all experienced some form of violence, conflict or instability.

They have come from their market stalls. They have come from their homes and community clubs to talk about infrastructure problems including poor drainage and sanitation, limited access to clean water, bad roads and poor transportation and long distance to access health services. Community issues include the high number of school dropouts and youth unemployment, often linked to the inability of families to meet education expenses including tertiary education, as well as rising food prices.

These stories and voices are the basis of reality on which the network builds its advocacy and currently informing the development of a Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

The anecdotal evidence presented is based on interviews and consultations with women aged between 20 and 70 years from 34 rural communities in Fiji between November 2011 and January 2012. Sixty-two (62) women attended monthly consultations during this period, 139 radio programmes were produced with women who attending the 16 Days community radio campaign and an additional 30 women contributed to consultations and broadcasts on the 2012 CSW theme. Women have spoken from an individual perspective, from the experiences of their extended families and the local clubs and women's groups they lead or attend.

Additionally 114 women were respondents in FemLINKPACIFIC's Household Expenditure and Income Survey (HIES) during this period from 4 rural centres and 1 urban centre.

Most of the women identify their husbands or fathers as the main income providers of the family, but many of the women are working in the informal sector to supplement their family income.

Most have no access to land

Individual household earnings varied from as low as FJD10 a week to a maximum of FJD500 a week with an average count of FJD170 a week.

Ninety-four percent (94%) identified radio as their key source of news and information with listening patterns during the early hours of the morning or in the afternoon.

Less than 25% have access to the daily newspapers and those who do prefer the local news.

Seventy-four percent (74%) have access to the Internet and those who do use it to access general information, for study or to contact family and friends.

Eighty-three percent (83%) own a pre pay mobile phone with an average of less than FJD20 allocated for recharge credit.

Linkages with UNSCR1325

These rural women are local members of the Regional Women's Media and Policy Network on UNSCR1325, which FemLINKPACIFIC has

coordinated since 2007 with partner organisations in Solomon Islands, Bougainville and Tonga. Since 2009 we have integrated the 1325 network into the GPPAC Pacific Regional Steering Group.

In the Pacific region there continues to be high levels of domestic and sexual violence against women, which escalates during conflict as general violence increases. Militarisation and the presence of weapons legitimise new levels of brutality and greater levels of impunity, so that violence becomes a new normality and becomes entrenched in post-conflict landscapes.

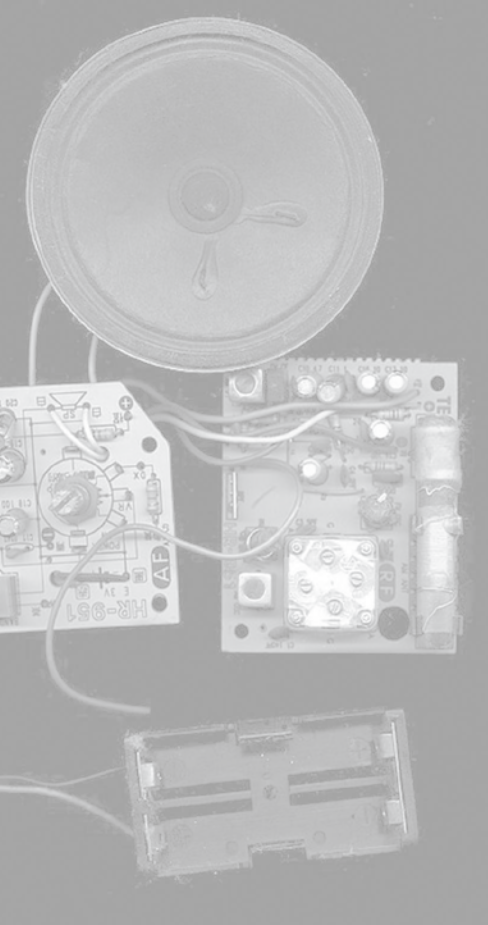
As the Pacific develops a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security this has been an important platform to reiterate the importance of conflict prevention as an essential element of resolution 1325.

UNSCR 1325 is about people's security, it is a way to redefine and transform security and understand the impact of war and conflict on men and women, and recognise and enhance the role of women as agents of change while also enhancing protection and the prevention of sexual gender based violence.

The role of Community Media and Community Radio

It is not enough to merely talk about the rights, peace and security of rural women, but we also need to ensure that rural women, in all her diversities are provided with their own media and communication platform. For FemLINKPACIFIC it is Community Radio. As women mobilise together around rural consultations to discuss their Peace and Human Security priorities, radio programmes and broadcasts enable them to be heard by local and national decision makers, and regional partners. The broadcasts are also featuring programmes from the young women producers who belong to Generation Next providing insights into the reality of young women.

During 2011 16-days campaign, FemLINKPACIFIC localised the theme connecting it to the monthly "1325" network discussions on Women, Peace and Human Security using a UN Security Resolution 1325



lens. UNSCR1325 reaffirms that women are crucial partners in shoring up the three pillars of lasting peace: economic recovery, social cohesion and political system. This also linked rural women to the 2011 UN Security Council Open Debate on UNSCR 1325 which reiterates that a legitimate and durable post-conflict political system must include full and equal participation of women in decision making.

Women have spoken of their life and human security issues. They have linked together across the airwaves because the barriers for their empowerment and development are the same. In one voice, they have called for action,

through services and programmes which will address the physical, emotional and institutional violence they experience in their daily lives, so that people can be informed, empowered to be involved in advocating for a safe and peaceful environment to live in without fear.

Interesting that these are the priorities raised at a time we learnt from a 2012 Budget Brief that Fiji's military budget has increased by \$5.2 million "due to the additional 42 troops for the Iraq Mission" with an additional \$550,000 allocated for military infrastructure upgrade. This is the same amount allocated to the Women's Plan of Action which is focused on "(providing) training to women in the rural and urban areas and in the process assist in the implementing of their projects that promotes the social and empowerment of women" while an additional \$300K is provided for repairs and maintenance of health facilities, including Health Centres and 103 Nursing Stations in the 4 divisions.

How do government programmes connect to women's human security? This is more than about going shopping. As women in other rural communities have highlighted, poor roads make it harder for women to access health services and

children to travel safely to and from school. With poor water and electricity supply, the burden of daily work remains an ongoing barrier to accessing opportunities for education, employment and decision-making especially when due to patriarchal decision-making structures, women just often don't get a chance to be part of the solutions, especially when it comes to violence.

Conclusion

On the occasion of the 56th session of Commission on the Status of Women, we call for the full participation of rural women in all decision-making processes on peace and security, from local communities to global policy processes. Enhancing decision-making on peace and security with their perspectives means enhancing Human Security For All.

Within these broad areas of human security are the critical issues being experienced in different ways and grappled with by Pacific women, who are working to place their recommendations for change on to the various state and regional agendas.

When women feel secure, peace is possible. When women feel secure enough to resist war and organise for peace, expressed through theatre, public demonstrations and civil disobedience, peace is on its way.

Women's civil society representatives have to be involved in helping redefine and ensure implementation of the new human security agenda, including representation on local and national councils and committees addressing the broad range of security issues including food security. ■

About the Author

Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls is the founder and executive director of FemLINKPACIFIC, a regional women's community media NGO, based in Fiji, and vice-president of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) Pacific sub-region. Sharon is also part of the Isis International general membership governing body; and is a member of the Global Civil Society Advisory Group of UN Women.