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## Women, security, and peace journalism in Fiji

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## Women, security, and peace journalism in Fiji

Sharon Bhagwan Rolls

*In 2010 femLINKpacific carried out a project aimed at “Communicating a culture of peace by strengthening women and community media and advocacy”. The objectives of the project were to strengthen the collaboration and consultative processes between femLINKpacific and mainstream media organisations, in particular the Fiji Media Council and the Pacific Islands News Association and to forge ties between peace-women and women working in the news media in order to broaden understanding of gender equality commitments to women, peace and security in Fiji.*

The period of implementation of this project was at a very difficult time in Fiji particularly following the (purported) abrogation of Fiji’s Constitution on April 10, 2009 and the subsequent imposition of the Public Emergency Regulation (PER) which included intensive media censorship. This immediately affected relationships with and within mainstream media, as well as the activities of anticipated project partners including the Fiji Media Council and the Pacific Islands News Association.

Additionally, femLINKpacific’s community media operations and activities were also subjected to media regulations and compliance with PER, requiring us to apply for “permits” or official permission to stage consultations and public activities. This application process was scrutinized by the police and often required us to negotiate to ensure there was no police presence in order to enable a “safe space” for participants.

In 2010, the promulgation of the Media Decree as well as the Crimes Decree also required the research aspect of the project to proceed more cautiously. It was therefore with immense gratitude that femLINKpacific was able to count on the support of WACC during this period, and particularly as we have had to extend the duration of the project to ensure we could complete the launch of the publication of the research.

### Digital story training activity

Since 2004 following the launch of femLINKpacific’s mobile women’s community radio station, femTALK 89.2FM, the organisation developed a series of training programmes for young women in Suva, building on the role of in-school students who assisted the organisation stage our monthly “weekend” community radio broadcasts. The Generation Next project emerged from these training initiatives with the vision to develop a core group of young women, from diverse background and experiences, to be the Producers and Broadcasters of the “suitcase radio station” in Suva.

In February 2010 femLINKpacific staged an interactive digital story telling workshop which brought together young women from femLINKpacific’s rural and regional women’s media network to enable them to recognise the opportunity for using media technology to communicate their critical issues of concern. Following the initial training, a follow up training programme was undertaken in August 2010 with members of femLINKpacific’s Generation Next Suva team and Fijian-Australian hip-hop artist/ youth arts worker Thelma Thomas aka MC Trey.

From August 30 to September 2, 2010, MC Trey worked a core with a group of femLINKpacific’s Suva-based Young Women Producers and Broadcasters to create a hip-hop anthem and digital story coinciding with the 10-year anniversary around UN Security

Council Resolution 1325. The collaboration included the production of a soundtrack for femLINKpacific's DVD and Radio campaign commemorating the 10th anniversary.

The production collaboration contributed to boosting our young women's production and communication skills and supported the technical production collaboration between MC Trey and our own Generation Next Technical Producer, Sulueti Waqa.

### **Strengthening networks with mainstream media organizations**

In July 2009 femLINKpacific's Executive Director and Regional 1325 network correspondent attended the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) Media Summit in Vanuato as an opportunity to strengthen networking with key members of the regional media network. While this was a chance to meet with and discuss the research process with a core group of media practitioners from across the Pacific region, the event was affected by issues relating to PINA's lack of solidarity on issues relating to media freedom in Fiji.

From October 2009, in addition to serving as the regional focal media focal point, femLINKpacific also assumed the role of the Pacific Secretariat of the Global Partnership of the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) which has a strong media advocacy component. The research component of this project was launched in partnership with the commemoration of the International Day of Peace – GPPAC event. The GPPAC Pacific statement in April and August 2010 strongly called for support for media freedom in Fiji and the Pacific.

### **Implementation of the research project**

femLINKPACIFIC's research "Communicating a Culture of Peace through Strengthened Women and Community Media and Advocacy" was officially launched on International Day of Peace (21 September 2009). Keynote speaker, Gary Wiseman, Manager of the UNDP Pacific Centre, highlighted the value of media and civil society organization collaboration and addressed the subject of peace journalism and its importance in resolving conflicts through non-violent ways to achieve sustainable and just peace. In his opinion, peace journalism is about the way stories are structured to bring about conflict analysis and non-violent responses by raising questions on how decisions by policy makers affect the people at the community level.

Interviews were carried out with media professionals and civil society organizations between November 2009 and January 2010. It should be noted that media interviews were limited to newsroom personnel and that in the context of civil society interviews there was a greater need to ensure that the "media" was used to refer to "news media" rather than the totality of different media productions.

To help inform our research process, we also drew on the experience and advice of two key research advisers. Reverend James Bhagwan and Seona Smiles, who assisted us in grounding our research to provide a substantive understanding of Fiji's media environment and the potential role of peace journalism as well as to provide a feminist context for our research.

A consultative Dialogue Session: "Communicating a Culture of Peace – Potential for Peace Journalism in Fiji" was hosted in Suva on May 22. The session saw femLINKpacific present its draft research findings, as well as gain further insight into the broader aspects of our research theme with input from Seona Smiles, Rev. James Bhagwan and Daryl Tarte.

Eleven participants and resource persons were also asked to consider the recommendations and develop practical strategies on the way forward relating to:

(a) What sort of peace-building/dialogue and/or media-related activity are you involved in?

(b) How have you been affected by the imposition of media censorship through the Public Emergency Decree since April 2008?

(c) Training has been discussed to improve the understanding of Peace Journalism – What should this training look like? Who should be involved?

(d) There is a need to bridge understanding between media and civil society organizations in the context of media freedom and freedom of expression – Do you think this is important? What should this process look like?

The dialogue enabled the participants to share in an understanding that while the mainstream media in Fiji has been blamed for creating political problems in the country, the perception needed to be corrected, as media reporting since 1987 has reflected the political situation in our country and has not been the cause of political coups or in Fiji's recent case the reason behind the differences between Qarase and Bainimarama. However, there is a need for consideration to be given to how the language of reporting can exacerbate an already tense situation.

Participants acknowledged that the state of emergency and newsroom censorship had hugely affected the work of newsroom staff including recent graduates. Additionally, concerns were raised that as a result of the censorship of the news media, in particular newspapers, while there are many positive stories being published, civil society voices, including through the Letters to the Editor and regular special columns, were being curtailed. "There is no such thing as balance now," one participant commented, and this was resulting in loss of confidence in the news media as a source of information and therefore people with access to the internet were relying on "blogs" as sources of information.

Participants shared their current initiatives which range from a more strategic use of the media in addition to staging educational workshops to also communicate with constituents, to actually having a policy to stay out of the media and making public statements but instead linking with civil society partners involved in peace-building dialogue. A few organisations undertake media monitoring and communication of issues is not only limited to the use of the media, but also in dialogue with government officials to assist in connecting community issues and priorities. For example, the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECEA) has developed a tele-centre project to enable rural communities to access ICTs such as fax, internet and telephone services.

One media organisation shared that they conduct community outreach and information sharing through school visits, while the University of the South Pacific is integrating issues on peace as well as the media in university curricula, workshops, research, journals, and conferences.

Discussion also centered on the need to work with media organisations to broaden and deepen their knowledge and understanding of peace-building while at the same time participants from civil society organisations (CSOs) acknowledged there was a need to broaden the appreciation of the evolution of Fiji's media environment and to be able to either find a nexus or alternatives to communicating through the media, given the concerns raised regarding sensational reporting, as one participant commented, "it is their the job to sell newspapers."

### **Media organizations**

Interviews were limited to local journalists. They said that, although the term peace journalism implied that the media had a responsibility to publish or broadcast stories that would not aggravate situations of conflict between parties, or give rise to conflict, the specific details of peace journalism as a discipline were not well understood. A shared understanding

of journalism as an instrument for peace-building is that it was important to be able to tell both sides of a story. Media professionals acknowledged that training in the techniques of peace journalism would be an advantage to the industry and to relevant government and non-government organizations.

Journalists also viewed themselves as generalists, covering stories on different subjects from day to day and use internal manuals to define the boundaries of terminology and appropriate approaches that could be used. There was for example a concern that some media organizations were still reporting on suicides and the methods employed to commit suicide. In the case of rape, there was also a concern that racial background of both the perpetrator and victim was still being highlighted. Issues like these in the peace journalism discourse can be approached using a conflict map as an analytical instrument where stories are reframed with a gender lens.

For example, a question to be considered before reporting a story could be: “What are the power relations between men and women, in the leadership of the conflict parties, in the negotiation panels, community structures, and family structures? How do these roles and power relations further explain the issue?”

From this vantage point, media, civil-society, and government stakeholders’ organizations would benefit from discussions, including training on gender-sensitive peace and conflict reportage of which senior and junior journalists including gender advocates could both facilitate and participate at different levels.

Regarding the censoring of the media through the Public Emergency Regulation (PER), it is believed that the restricted access of information has stopped analysis and opinions in all sections of the community. The concept of focusing only on positive stories means it is difficult to express alternate viewpoints and most of the reporting concern day to day events outside of politics.

Those in the media realize that knowledge gained from consultations with a wider section of the community improves the quality of stories produced. News journalists are frequently involved in consultations on the environment, for example, climate change or socio-political development, such as civic voter education. These types of consultations can similarly be used for advocacy of gender through peace-building and conflict resolution focused reporting.

### **Role of civil society organizations**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in the country involved in peace-building processes continue to support freedom of the press as part of the necessary processes of peace-building for the country. Peace journalism in these organizations is understood as writing about the possibilities of creating peace in situations of conflict in the local context and in warring countries. It is also understood as a form of reporting and communicating of information by journalists that does not create violence in the community or conflict – where words are carefully selected and the monitoring of the view that there is a need for journalists to understand the concepts and the processes of peace journalism.

There were varied responses on the effect of media regulation on women in the rural areas. There are those who believe that women are still receiving newspapers, watch television, and listen to the radio and have equal access to information as do women in the urban area. Yet whilst access is readily available, there is an agreement that the limitation is in the content of the daily news and the question of whether social and economic issues are also viewed through the daily experiences of women.

In terms of the availability of alternative perspectives and viewpoints of what constitutes 'news' in the country, as one respondent shared: "Regulation of the media has really affected (people)...You can no longer believe what you see in the paper which is sad and when you can no longer believe everything that you see in there, it leads to doubt, it leads to all kinds of rumours and misconception of things and it doesn't help with democracy, with people's right to represent their points of view."

Through the development of the internet, some academics and other writers have turned to blog sites to share views and engage in discussion. It appears that although the different sectors, including government, non-government organizations, and civil society organizations have a common objective to promote a culture of peace in the country, each sector utilizes separate methods in the dissemination of information.

The news media are seen by the CSOs as playing an important role in providing information on issues such as health, education, agriculture. In this area, television and newspapers have regular segments that focus on the people and the economy of the rural areas of Fiji. Community radio is viewed as a necessary avenue for women at the grassroots to tell their own stories in their own words.

Most respondents viewed the media as playing a powerful role in shaping the opinions of the citizens and would benefit from engaging in discussion with the CSOs on how peace journalism could be utilized as a mechanism for conflict resolution and peace-building in society.

### Highlights of the research and report

femLINKpacific's research report was launched by the Counsellor of AUSAID on September 10, 2010, at an event which also commemorated the organisation's 10th anniversary campaign of communicating UNSCR1325. The publication (report and poster) was distributed to media organisations, the University of the South Pacific, Ministry of Information, Dialogue Fiji as well as the Citizens Constitutional Forum. The report highlights and recommends:

1. There is a need for peace journalism training as a technique to be utilized by the media, civil society organizations, and the relevant government ministries to: a) Improve understanding and practice of peace journalism and communication practices; b) Incorporate it as a key component of local and national level peace-building strategies including the prevention of further tensions and the resurgence of violent conflict; c) Build bridges between and within media and civil society; d) Strengthen collaboration between Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and media organizations support freedom of the media / freedom of expression as a necessary process of peace-building in the country.

2. There is a need to broaden the understanding of gender inclusive perspectives in media content including community media and civil society information and communication strategies, this could be assisted through the incorporation of the strategies and practice of the Global Media Monitoring Project coordinated by the World Association for Christian Communication.

3. Support dialogue processes to enable better understanding of different styles of communication and to improve understanding the use of tools of conflict analysis and transformation.

4. Support greater interaction between media practitioners and civil society to deepen understanding between these different groups and their perspectives.

5. Incorporate the use of a 'gender equality lens' in media codes of ethics.

6. Strengthen the recognition of the role of community media to bridge the gap between the mainstream media content in particular to engender and broaden the incorporation of rural women's perspectives.

7. Partnerships between the media and CSOs, such as femLINKpacific to conduct awareness raising programmes with the media on Gender, Peace-building and the Media. It was noted that training must be contextualized to suit Fiji's realities and experiences. Such awareness raising programmes could enable and encourage taking a more inclusive approach to the range of issues currently being addressed, particularly to ensure a diverse range of viewpoints and experiences.

8. This type of collaboration is useful to build capacity of CSO groups to engage more effectively and positively with the media, and to enhance their media communication skills.

9. Peace journalism efforts should ensure engagement with the editorial process, as well as training and development programmes with journalists and media practitioners.

10. The role of faith based organisations, including the churches, was highlighted as another critical communication space both within faith based communities as well as through interfaith gatherings and communication strategies.

11. Develop a directory of peace-building terms, to assist both media and civil society groups to avoid the use of words and expressions which represent or can create more conflict in vulnerable environment.

12. Enhancing the media literacy building on efforts of Fiji Media Watch and other CSOs could also deepen the appreciation of Fiji's diverse media environment.

13. There is an opportunity to conduct a needs analysis to inform the further development of journalism training curriculum.

14. There is a need for development partners to understand the important need to resource civil society media and communication strategies including qualified staff. CSO media and communication strategies, therefore, need to take into account the range of media forms available, including international media and community media forms.

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