

Feedback on the UNESCO/FemlinkPACIFIC Workshop on Empowering Communities through Information

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It is critical to increase practical knowledge on the Freedom of Information, Freedom of Communication/Media and ICT for Development, and this must reach women in rural communities:

That is the opinion of Elena Dovarua of the Catholic Women's League in Fiji, one of the 18 participants at the UNESCO sponsored Fiji Workshop on "Empowering Communities through Information" workshop and demonstration broadcast which has hosted by femLINKPACIFIC: Media Initiatives for Women in Suva from July 12 – 15th, "I think this workshop should be held in all centres like in Savusavu, Labasa, Ba, not only in Suva" she said, "This workshop has helped me a lot to understand the role of women's community media and has also educated me about a lot of new issues."

For Fuata Antonio, who belongs to the Suva branch of the Rotuman Women's Association, the workshop has strengthened her in her realization of the important role women and women's groups play in keeping their communities as well as the broader society informed of developments in the country. Her colleague, Raijeli Mua agreed: "I am empowered with new knowledge," said the former Assistant Secretary of the National Council of Women Fiji.

More training workshops on these issues are still needed however, said Miriama Rayawa Cama of the Fiji Chapter of the Pan Pacific South East Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA), in order to ensure more women leaders within the NGO movement are informed about the developments around international human rights commitments and constitutional issues, so as to improve leadership within Fiji's women's civil society: "We need to be informed about these issues, we cannot afford to be ignorant," she said

Many of the participants agreed that having key policy experts from the Solicitor General's Office, the Fiji Human Rights Commission, the Citizens' Constitutional Forum, the Ministry of Information, Communication and Media Relations, Fiji Media Council, Fiji Media Watch, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Fiji Disabled Peoples Association and the United Nations Development Programme: "The presentations were not only relevant and informative, but because we had the 'top' level policy people attend and deliver the information made the workshop even more successful," said Sainiana Rokovucago

After 2 days of receiving intensive policy information, the workshop participants then prepared for and participated in a demonstration broadcast using femLINKPACIFIC's mobile community radio station, "the radio in a suitcase", femTALK 89.2FM: "I am proud that Fiji has such a project, and that there is an initiative to help us women be heard. It inspires me to try harder to do the same, and encourage others," said Leny Lee, a graduate of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement's Emerging Leaders Forum, and a campaigner for the Pacific Centre for Public Integrity (PCPI)

"I can now see the suitcase radio as a practical form of ICT4D to reach and inform rural and remote communities, and to enable women in these communities to share their stories" said Ana Rakacikaci, a community radio broadcast volunteer," and I suggest we use the community radio (more) as a means of informing our communities about Freedom of Information and Freedom of Communication."

At the end of the workshop, participants in their Outcome Statement stressed the need to expedite efforts to ensure more women are informed about the purpose and benefits of

the Freedom of Information Act, and the draft Broadcasting and Telecommunication Acts, as these are critical means of ensuring women's active involvement in all information and communication channels: "We need to ensure gender equality in the formulation of policy, programmes and initiatives, in the ICT sector"

This requires closer and greater collaboration with NGOs working in this area, especially by the two national women's organisations, the National Council of Women Fiji and the Soqosoqo Vakamarama, "We also need to ensure women from all ethnic groups participate in future consultations and broadcasts," added Ana Rakacikaci.

As participants also were informed of the information-communication challenges facing persons with disabilities, they are adamant that there is not only a need for all stakeholders to be inclusive of the distinct needs of rural communities, especially women and young women, but also of persons with disabilities in order to ensure they are able to participate actively in all aspects of development towards the social, economic and political reconstruction of the Fiji Islands:

"We urge the Fiji Government to incorporate the principles of the Biwako Millennium Framework to ensure the information-communication needs of persons with disabilities are incorporated and supported in national development planning, in particular the National ICT Plan"

The outcome statement also reiterates the need for greater visible support at national and regional levels to ensure democratic information and communication channels, including mainstream and community media forms have the potential to make a positive impact on our lives and can assist in peace-building, the promotion of human security and good governance, which all contribute to building a positive environment for the development of all communities in the Fiji Islands: "We say this, knowing that it is not only our legal right to be provided with information, and to be able to communicate our viewpoints, but because better decisions can be made for our country, when all Fiji Islanders are empowered to be actively involved in decision making for sustainable and equitable development, for peace," said participants.

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