Gender in Media and ICTs: A View from the Pacific Islands

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IT for Change

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The Global Context to ICTs and Gender Equality in the Pacific Islands

The Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing held in 1995, was a watershed for media and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) policy advocacy by the women's movement. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action called for: "Increase in participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication." It also called for the promotion of "a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media".

However, in the recent review (2005) of the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action, analysis of progress in implementation of women and media issues in Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action was absent. This is of concern for women and media advocates, especially in relation to review of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs+5) and processes around and in follow up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

Civil society and particularly women's groups have to be involved in decision making and not leave it entirely upto the government or the private sector if the WSIS process is to provide the necessary impetus for the equitable development of the information society. Our experience in tracking the development of Fiji's National ICT policy has led us to note that there has been some influence of the WSIS process on national ICT processes but there have been limited interventions by civil society groups, and particularly so, by women's groups, the media and other NGOs. The women's NGO, femLINKPACIFIC, has made interventions and been involved in attempting to influence national ICT policies. However, without substantive linkages with women's equality commitments and gender mainstreaming at national policy level, the development of ICT sector in Fiji will remain in the hands of those professing narrow interests in the government and the private sector, and continue to perpetuate the invisibility of women in the arenas of production and use of information.

As a point for entry to influence the process, women's organisations and civil society groups could capitalize on the inclusion in the Fiji Government's "e-FIJI strategy" which states that community groups and not-for-profit organisations must be in the position to understand the Internet and use it to access information, government services, business products and other services, and to create dialogue and enhance civic awareness and action. However, the e-FIJI strategy also has limitations in that its ICT focus is narrowly on the Internet and on providers and not other issues of governance, access, ownership and the use of ICTs as appropriate technology.[1]

The long-term implications of such ICT policies in Fiji and the Pacific region are difficult to decipher generally, and there is still limited analysis of how ICT issues, and the manner in which

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1 Fiji Government Draft ICT Policy 2003

they are decided on at present, will affect gender, education and information inequities in the society. There are concerns among women's groups about how issues of violence against women, poverty and political empowerment are and will be affected by national ICT policy and technological developments. There is also recognition of a need to involve more women in ICT participation, access and policy making. For this to happen, women need to develop a basic understanding of the technical language and the ICT policy issues that impact women.

Increasing the involvement of women in ICT policy issues can be done in partnership with the government's national women's machinery. International organisations active in the area of gender and ICTs, such as the International Women's Tribune Centre, can help by providing important linkages between the WSIS process and the 12 critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action. Presently, limited capacity and resources available to women's departments across the Pacific region make it difficult for national machineries and women's organisations to improve their advocacy on ICT policy issues.

For small Pacific island states, such as Fiji, the debates, implications and significance of ICT developments are largely presented in terms of technological or economic issues, and other issues such as social impacts, equitable access and gender equality, are not being raised significantly. Therefore, there is limited activity at present to advance gender equality provisions in ICT policy, technological development, or access, in Fiji. ICT policy and technological developments remain primarily in the hands of government and the private sector, with little civil society involvement, and in the case of Fiji and the Pacific, the private sector means foreign multinational companies.

In the past ten years, issues of communications and media have become a critical cross-cutting development issue and are understood as vital tools for the advancement and empowerment of women. The provisions on Women and Media in Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action have provided impetus for women and gender advocates in many national, regional, and international processes to strengthen and expand advocacy for women's empowerment through media and communications.

Media and information and communication technologies (ICT) are also gaining greater recognition as primary tools to inform women across the world on advocacy issues relevant to their lives, including about the Beijing Platform for Action, with a view to achieving the strategic objectives in Section J and in all of the other twelve Critical Areas of Concern in the Beijing Platform for Action. It was a serious concern therefore, for the Women's Media and ICT Caucus[2] attending the 49th session of the Commission of the Status of Women meeting (March 2005) to review implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action ten years since its formulation, that women and media issues were excluded in the ongoing deliberations on the 10-year review. This elimination of women and media issues from discussion on implementation occurred despite the fact that regional reviews from the Asia-Pacific region and from Latin America and the Caribbean had   stressed   the   role   of   media   and   ICTs   in   women's   empowerment.[3]

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2 The Women, Media and ICT caucus was a group of women's media and information and communication organizations attending the 49th session of the UN 49th session of the Commission of the Status of Women meeting and the 10-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action and included AMARC (World Association of Community Broadcasters) -Women's International Network, Association for Progressive Communications - Women's Networking Support Programme, Asia Pacific Women's Watch, Feminist International Radio Endeavor, femLINKPACIFIC, Gender Education Research and Technologies, GenderLinks South Africa, International Association of Women in Radio and Television, International Women's Tribune Centre, Isis WICCE, NRO Frauenforum, UK Gender Statistics Users Group, Women's Environment and Development Organization, Women's E-News

3 Resolution submitted by women's media and information and communication organizations attending the 49th session of the UN CSW and the 10-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action

ICTs for Women's Empowerment: Facing up to Some Hard Questions

The point of departure for an empowerment approach to ICTs and gender equality is: If empowerment is about challenging social norms, ensuring the right shift towards equalizing power relations as well as enabling voice and expressions of one's experiences and being able to actively claim one's rights, then what does all this mean to women in rural communities in the Pacific Island region where the basic necessities of life remain unfulfilled?

What can empowerment for women through ICTs mean for women who still do not have access to electricity? To even listen to radio, means having batteries, which cost money, and in many areas decent broadcast reception remains an issue. And many women also still have to negotiate with the men in the household or the community to be able to sit in at family or communal listening to radio.

These questions are posed when trying to decipher the implications of ICTs for women in a Pacific island country such as Fiji. What does it mean to have ICT access when there is no piped clean water despite lots of running streams; when children still have no bridge to cross over to get to school; where the roads are so bad that even three-ton trucks refuse to transport villagers to the town with their goods during the rainy season, when these roads can become impassable, and which can also mean lack of medical care during life threatening emergencies?

What do ICT innovations for poverty reduction mean in circumstances where consecutive governments have not heard villagers' and communities' calls for much needed infrastructure assistance and where consequently, every week, villagers have to struggle to get their cash crops to the market in the capital city in time and have to hope that market prices will be fair to them, and bring in the much needed cash for their children's school expenses?

Would it help if the local health centre which serves a couple of surrounding villages had a computer linked to the health department, so that the community could access proper medical advice and pharmaceutical supplies? Or if, through a computer, the Agricultural Marketing Authority could contact villagers and assist them with market information, and ease the arduous task and high costs of getting goods to the capital city more than 100 kilometres away?

These issues have relevance in considering the role of ICTs for women's empowerment and gender equality. What does "using ICT for gender equality" mean if women do not have access to information on ICT issues from women's civil society groups, who advocate women's rights and gender equality in development in the capital city, but cannot assist village women in negotiating for a stronger presence in district and village meetings?

ICT Policy in the Pacific Islands

The Pacific region has been slow to make the connection between ICTs and women's empowerment. In 1994, before the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Pacific Island Governments attended the South Pacific Commission's Triennial Meeting for Pacific Women's Ministries in Noumea, New Caledonia.[4] "Women and Media" issues were not recognised

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4 Organized by the then Pacific Women's Bureau of the South Pacific Commission (SPC). Today SPC is known as the Secretariat of the Pacific

Community. Pacific Island countries and territories which are members of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community: Cook Islands, Fiji, French

as a priority for inclusion in the Pacific Platform for Action (PPA). In failing to do so, Pacific Island governments lost the opportunity to make an early connection between role of information and communication and the goal to advance gender equality, especially through the use of media technologies.

These governments failed to recognise the power of information as a means to assisting women in rural communities, for example through enabling access to better health services as well as to markets for their cash crops. They also failed to recognise that the images and perspectives portrayed daily by the Pacific regional media greatly impact the status of women and girls and that these images are produced by a highly commercialsed, profit-driven, "man-stream" media where only a few (mainly men) control the daily decision making on content and presentation of information.

The high-level ministerial meeting attended by eight Pacific Island countries[5], adopted the PPA in 1994, which highlighted "women in shared decision making" as a national development priority. However, in the 2004 review of the PPA ten years later, it was shown that Pacific Island states have the lowest record on women's political representation in the world: Furthermore, the review noted that: "There are very few successes to report with regard to shared decision making, the situation has not changed much since 1993. Most Pacific countries have no women in the legislature and in those that do (have them); women represent a very small proportion of members. This inequality is a major constraint to women's advancement."[6]

Now, ten years since the landmark inclusion of Women and Media as one of the 12 global priorities for the advancement of women's human rights in the Beijing Platform for Action and after its exclusion from the Pacific Plan of Action, the few women's media advocates and practitioners in the Pacific region are playing 'catch-up' in order to formulate the required gender implications as Pacific Island governments develop national ICT policies in the region.

The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat[7], the main political decision making body of the region, is in the process of implementation of the Pacific Plan[8], a regional road map designed to enhance regional cooperation in the key areas of economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security. Adopted by the Forum Leaders in October 2005, the Pacific Plan also includes a Digital Strategy, which recognises the potential of ICT to contribute to the aspirations and goals of people of the Pacific region, while also acknowledging the need to overcome major obstacles to ICT development, including: poor access in rural and remote areas, limited access to the global ICT backbone, shortages in human resources and high overall costs of ICT deployment. The strategy, therefore, attempts to provide a framework to accelerate the

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Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated State of Micronesia, Niue, New Caledonia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Island, Samoa, American Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Wallis and Futuna

5 Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, Tuvalu, Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati and Nauru

6 Pacific Platform for Action on Women – An Evaluation of the Thirteen Critical Issues and the Status of Pacific Women (1994 – 2004) – Dr. Penelope Schoeffel, Consultant, Pacific Women's Bureau, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea, 20 July 2004

7 The Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS) is a regional inter-governmental agency which assists Pacific Island governments formulate and implement policies on a number of key development sectors for the Pacific Island region, in particular economics and trade, security and communications. Australia and New Zealand Governments are key members of PIFS. The 14 Pacific Island Member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat are: Cook Islands, Federated State of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

8 The Pacific Plan is a regional plan being coordinated by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. The Pacific Plan emerged from recommendations from Pacific Leaders at the 2005 Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Auckland, New Zealand and is designed to strengthen regional cooperation and integration under core themes for the region established by the Leaders: economic growth (which includes the Digital Strategy), Sustainable Development, Good Governance and Security. There has been limited engagement with civil society, especially at community level, in the development of this plan. (See www.pacificplan.org).

applications of ICTs at the national and regional levels through harmonised national and regional activity.

The Forum Secretariat with the CROP ICT Working Group[9] has developed a Digital Strategy Roadmap for the delivery and implementation of the Pacific Regional Digital Strategy. The roadmap proposes initiatives in the short to medium term based on the national, regional and global priorities identified in the Digital Strategy in order to enable appropriate regional institutional arrangements so that Pacific Island countries are able to pool existing resources more effectively, access new technologies and develop capacities to support infrastructure development.

However, it must be pointed out that the perspective of even the CROP ICT Working Group is mostly limited to that of technical practitioners, and does not reflect a holistic incorporation of social and development priorities, including gender equality.

The following quote from the Digital Strategy document outlines the priorities and objectives for the region, where gender issues, however, do find mention:

> *"The objectives of the Digital Strategy are to:*
> a) *Encourage policies and regulations that facilitate development of the sector and are appropriate to the people and the cultures of the Pacific;*
> b) *Encourage construction of domestic telecommunications and information infrastructure;*
> c) *Promote a competition-driven environment;*
> d) *Encourage business/private sector investment and participation;*
> e) *Intensify cooperation among member countries;*
> f) *Narrow the gap in information infrastructure between advanced and developing countries and urban and rural areas;*
> g) *Ensure easy access to information through ICTs that strengthens cooperation between stakeholders, fosters good governance, develops the private sector and improves service delivery;*
> h) *Promote full and equal participation of women and other marginalized groups in ICTs through mainstreaming gender and equity perspectives into ICT policy and programmes.*
> i) *Ensure open and non-discriminatory access to public networks for all information providers and users in accordance with domestic laws and regulations;*
> j) *Ensure universal access to public services in telecommunications;*
> k) *Promote creation of local content, which reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the region;*
> l) *Ensure the protection of privacy, data security and intellectual property rights including cultural property;*
> m) *Ensure ICTs will be used to inform and connect Pacific Island populations and that they will benefit from flexible and appropriate education and training."*

According to the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, all stakeholders – including national ICT advisory committees, regional organisations and the donor community – need to play a role in ensuring that ICT policies and plans are well supported and are relevant to

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9 The ICT Working group is comprised of ICT specialists of the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) who include the Forum Fisheries Agency, Pacific Islands Development Program, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, Sputh Pacific Tourism Organisation and University of the South Pacific

all sectors of the community. "When you get right down to it, this sector is, after all, about empowerment."[10] This recognition at a political level is critical, especially for women and civil society groups, who will need to constantly remind policy makers of these promises of empowerment through ICTs. It is particularly important for women who are still struggling to take their rightful place as legitimate stakeholders to ensure that whatever technology and media forms are developed and used will meet the needs of not only the private sector, information-technology professionals and the national planning offices, but also the needs of women, the majority of whom are in rural communities, persons with disabilities as well as other marginalized groups.

For this purpose, we need to go beyond the political rhetoric and ensure that these groups get all the practical, policy and regulatory assistance needed to build on the progress that may have already been made in establishing community-centered media and information networks and to ensure that these advances are not subsumed by a political process which may get narrowly defined by regional bureaucracy and private sector interests rather than the realities and the needs of Pacific Island communities. Gender equality advocates need to ensure true equity in Pacific islands' ICT developments. Some of the equity issues are implicated in ensuring that rural-based communities have equitable access to and participation in decision making on ICT developments that can potentially create a 'global village in cyber space'.

There are many sections of the Digital Strategy that women need to especially engage with to ensure that their perspectives and priorities are included. For example, the part (a) on Pacific cultures and traditions could potentially be used to justify the exclusion of women from equal access to ICTs because the culture may be seen to dictate so. Some of the provisions, (c) on a competition-driven environment may meet business sector interests but de-prioritize the implementation of other provisions which are noticeably lower down on the list, especially when there are conflicting claims on policy – for example, part (j) on ensuring universal access and part (m) on using ICTs to inform and connect Pacific populations. The provision (h) for women's participation and promoting gender equality in all policy and programmes is probably only a lip-service or operationalised simplistically by inviting women to attend regional policy meetings where the agenda is rarely civil-society friendly, let alone women-friendly. Unfortunately, reflecting the WSIS process at the global level, the Digital Strategy discussions for the Pacific are part of a process already geared strongly towards government and private sector power in decision-making.

One case in point is the outcome of the March 2006 Forum on Information and Communications Technologies Policy and the Ministerial meeting. What was endorsed by yet another political declaration was the formation of a taskforce to consider implementation of key roadmap components through using a stepladder approach, which is largely techno-managerial, to ICT development. However, there is no clear recognition of the need for social awareness, including gender analysis, in all aspects of implementation.

Accordingly the focus in the first year will be (all the text below in italics is quoted from the declaration at the Ministerial meeting)[11] :

> a) *The taskforce should develop qualitative and quantitative indicators which will assist with establishing each country's progress towards agreed goals.*

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10 Speech by Mr. Greg Urwin, Secretary General, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Pacific Islands ICT Ministerial Meeting, 30 March 2006.

11 Forum ICT Ministerial Meeting – Wellington Declaration, March 30, 2006

b) *Countries are encouraged to provide data and to participate in a stock-take to determine the e-readiness of their country, which would include assessment of infrastructure, services, platforms and user capacity and costs.*

c) *Countries are encouraged to develop or refine their ICT Policies with particular emphasis on increasing stakeholder engagement and provide a copy of their ICT Policy to the Forum which will arrange them to be put up on the web for use by other countries.*

d) *Countries are encouraged also to provide at least e-mail capacity to Government agencies and a basic web site to gain experience in e-government.*

e) *The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat will approach the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and other agencies such as ICANN with a view to provision of regulatory and policy capacity development.*

f) *The taskforce will investigate options and make recommendations to governments for a regional approach to the purchase of bulk lease or purchase arrangements for satellite capacity to increase affordability of access by remote communities.*

g) *Communication Ministers recognise that greater involvement in the global information society brings both economic and social benefits and also policy and regulatory challenges. Strong national ICT policy and legislative frameworks and effective enforcement regimes are crucial to protect our citizens, our networks and our reputation from spam and other e-security threats. We recognise that these are global concerns and that regional cooperation is also necessary to strengthen capacity to deal with spam and wider Internet security concerns. We agree to develop complementary anti-spam policies and legislation at the national level and cooperate regionally to combat the growing problem of spam.*

That a meeting of ICT/Communications Ministers be convened in the first half of 2007 to review progress on the Digital Strategy and to guide further developments of the Roadmap and Ladder to meet short term goals and develop long terms goals for the region" (From the Ministerial declaration).

As the Digital Strategy looks to ensure that the implications of convergence of ICTs are recognised, and the resulting opportunities seized for Pacific island peoples, it is also encouraging that in the context of empowerment, it further recognises that one of the most important aspects of the communications sector for many villagers in the Pacific is radio and television broadcasting. While new technologies in satellite and internet broadcasting offer new ways of broadcasting, we also need to look at the recent developments in FM broadcasting solutions that offer the ability to provide very specific, very low cost services:

> *"The possibility of servicing remote locations in local languages or of special interest groups such as women's groups taking the opportunity to own and operate community stations has now become a reality."[12]*

The Pacific Islands Governments and the Forum Secretariat intend to support these developments by including community media practitioners in a proposed regional meeting for Pacific Broadcasters. However, it would be important to note at this stage that such opportunities to engage in the regional policy making processes have actually been driven more by the initiative of small groups such as femLINKPACIFIC, rather than the members of Pacific Regional NGOs or the mainstream broadcasters themselves. Unfortunately, information and

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12 Speech by Mr. Greg Urwin, Secretary General, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Pacific Islands ICT Ministerial Meeting, 30 March 2006.

communications sector continues to be a development issue that is largely neglected or left out even from NGO advocacy agendas.

Civil Society Involvement in ICT Policy-Making in the Pacific

The current engagement by civil society in ICT policy making in the Pacific is outlined in the most recent analysis of policy making in this sector done in a Situational Analysis and Needs Assessment (SANA) undertaken in fourteen Pacific Island countries in 2004.[13]

The SANA studied three key sectors responsible for the promotion of good governance:

The Media sector included in-country organisations producing print, radio, television and/or online media material for the public; their ownership, financing, coverage, audience, technology and technical support; public service roles and responsibilities; local content, particularly on issues relating to governance; human resources — numbers, roles, qualifications and experience, pay levels and turnover; and, internal training programs and training experience. The study also included national media organisations such as media watch organisations, media councils and professional associations and the existence of professional codes of ethics and mechanisms for their enforcement.

The Government sector included structures, mechanisms and protocols for government communication and information on governance issues; skill and experience levels in relation to communications; internal training programs and training experience; and, related technology. On governments and capacity, the study considered capacity at political and senior official level, as well as at operational and technical levels in relevant agencies.

The Civil Society sector covered the main organisations concerned with governance issues and communications activities and media. Funding, technology, constituents and human resources (positions, skills and experience) and access to training and training experience, were also surveyed.

The SANA's findings reiterated that currently, in the Pacific Island region, taking up of women's empowerment issues is extremely limited within the ICT debate primarily because many of the women's civil society organisations have themselves had limited engagement with ICT policy and programs.

- There has generally been limited engagement by civil society on ICTs as a development issue and it is generally left to a small number of NGOs, such as femLINKPACIFIC or practitioner-based groups, such as the Pacific Islands Telecommunications Association

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13 'Informing Citizens: Opportunities for Media and Communications in the Pacific' is a regional study of the development needs in this important sector coordinated by the Australian aid-(AusAID)-funded Pacific Media and Communications Facility(PMCF. The information in this report was collected by 18 Pacific Island country researchers. The recommendations for capacity building were contributed by a Reference Group of Pacific Islanders. 'Informing Citizens' is a handbook for all those interested in an effective and vibrant media in the region, and is a valuable study of this sector in the Pacific The AusAID-funded Pacific Media and Communications Facility (PMCF) commenced in May 2004. The PMCF is a three-year regional media governance project involving the 14 Forum Island countries. Informing Citizens: opportunities for media and communications in the Pacific is the major output for Year One. The report contains a situation analysis and needs assessment (SANA) which assesses the capacity of the media, government and civil society sectors to promote good governance in the Pacific through the media. The Pacific Island countries included in the survey are: the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

- (PITA), Pacific Islands Chapter of the Internet Society (PICISOC), Asia Pacific Network Information Centre (APNIC) specializing on the issue, to engage accordingly at regional and national policy levels.
- While there has been a conscious effort by national and regional NGOs to broaden the context of the Pacific Plan, much of the focus has been on the four goals of the Pacific Plan (as mentioned above). There has been limited engagement by NGOs on the Digital Strategy of the Pacific Plan, as it is possibly regarded as a technical platform, rather than giving consideration to the impact it will have on Pacific Island countries and communities, considering the current trade regimes, as well as the broader regional regulatory framework, which is very important in issues such as negotiating on the regulation and sharing of bulk purchasing of satellite capacity.
- National women's machineries in the region which could take up the policy issues remain limited to existing service and programme delivery roles and in many cases, lack the institutional capacity to advocate on current and emerging policy issues of importance to national development, in particular, regarding ICTs.
- Among women's NGOs in cities or urban centers, ICT developments have been absorbed at the practical level of use, as individuals or organisations incorporate ICT facilities into their work. However, the overall policy framework and ICT development implications, or uses for women's empowerment, are not closely studied or prioritized in advocacy agendas on women's rights.

Apart from the limited capacity of women's NGOs and national women's machineries across the Pacific Island region to initiate and sustain effective policy interventions, the Pacific region and island countries are also faced with the limited capacity of the overall government machinery to function better at cross-sectoral involvement in ICT policy development and decisions. Currently, in most Pacific Island countries, there is usually only one government department that is held responsible for a wide range of media areas, including media policy and legislation, public service broadcasting, media relations and monitoring, telecommunications legislation and oversight as well as ICT development (being responsible for telecommunications policy and legislative development and broadcast licensing). Government departments and personnel are often not in positions of expertise or do not have the information needed to negotiate nationally, regionally or internationally through the complex technical or economic ramifications of ICT developments which are often run, monopolized or controlled by foreign interests.

Fiji National ICT Policy Developments

This and the two following sections look more specifically at the ICT and media policy scenario of Fiji. The Fiji Government Draft ICT Policy states as its objective that "the scenario for Fiji is such that from a policy perspective, the objective is to provide the necessary impetus for the development of the information economy." "What will be key in this drive is the creation and tasking of an effective delivery structure in an entity to be called e-Fiji (Information and Communications Technology Development Agency for Fiji) to ensure that the following strategic outcomes are achieved: Government on-line; business e-enabled; and community e-empowerment".

Aligned to the objectives of the National Strategic Development Plan, the objectives of the information economy, as per the ICT policy, include the following:

- Unleashing the potential and use of ICT utilising world best practice;
- Improving the quality of life, education and work for the people of Fiji with particular emphasis on bridging the "digital divide";
- Enhancing Fiji's participation in the global economy;

- Joining the world scene in terms of adhering closely to the principles enshrined in the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Actions and the UN Millennium Development Goals;
- Strategising for private sector investment via strategic partnerships and new alliances with particular emphasis on supporting indigenous Fijians in business and special interest groups ; and
- Maximising economic gains and focusing on niche market opportunities."

In the Fiji Islands, the few civil society groups, and even fewer women's NGOs who have tried to influence ICT policies have had limited opportunity to engage at national as well as regional level, especially in terms of being able to influence the draft Pacific Digital Strategy. The overall lack of resources to ensure a gender mainstreaming approach, therefore, is debilitating the potential of women to articulate, even in the simplest manner to their governments, the implications that ICT policies have for ICT for development and for women's empowerment.

Certainly one should applaud the National Information Technology Advisory Committee (ITAC) of the Fiji Government, for espousing a vision not only of meeting the general policy objectives but also for ensuring ICT access and e-literacy of the more vulnerable groups so that all Fiji citizens share the economic and social benefits of the information economy, particularly the elderly, the disabled, women, rural and other socially marginalized groups.

However, doubts remain about the degree of political will of Fiji or other Pacific governments to be more gender inclusive in policy implementation, especially when women's groups were barely consulted in the formulation of the national ICT policy, reflecting just how much women's participation in all areas of social life continues to remain undervalued.

Furthermore, it has been noted that globally, even when women have made a decisive contribution to economic, social, political and cultural development in their countries, there is no increase in women's presence and participation in decision-making on ICT policy and resources. This is in part due to the hampering of women's right to communicate by the existence of gender inequality and the lack of access to communications and information for most women, which is a blanket reality.[14]

Women's Access to Information and Communications Technology in Fiji

In the Fiji Islands, many women's groups are still limited in their access to internet/e-mail simply because the group/club does not even have a computer. It is critical that donors and development partners realize that for many women in rural settlements even electricity supply may be a problem, and therefore it may not be possible to connect to the Internet.

In April 2002, the National Council of Women, Fiji, took stock of its affiliate organisations to gauge whether its members had access to computers. It was very clear that even though each of these member organisations perform a range of programmes and projects either independently or through donor assistance, they continue to keep basic records, manage to meet donors' timelines and criteria, and operate without a formal office or administrative environment, or a computer and fax machine, and in some cases, even without a typewriter – let alone access to email!

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14 From an article by Dafne Plou, Journalist and Consultant, Argentina. This text was first published by WACC in Media and Gender Monitor.

(http://www.wacc.org.uk/publications/mgm/12/contents.html)

Although through femLINKPACIFIC women are being encouraged to pick up video camera or audio recording equipment to document and produce their stories, women need to be encouraged to acquire the knowledge and skills for accessing and using computers and the Internet. Use of such information and communications tools is necessary for effectively participating in global advocacy, lobbying, and social and political networks. This is one way for ensuring that women's viewpoints, even from countries where their voices are marginalized nationally, reach all regions of the globe.

'Technophobia', or the lack of confidence in their own ability to use equipment or operate new machines for their communications, is itself a significant obstacle to women in using new technologies. This phobia about technology can marginalize women of the global South, especially those women who lack personal access to equipment and cannot easily attend training programs due to demands on their time. In order to learn and practice use of new ICTs, such training in use of basic ICT equipment should be conducted in local languages and women's groups should also be provided help with the resources for training, supplies, upkeep and ongoing costs for use of communications equipment that assists them in their work.

This would then mean that more women in their local communities would have the power of information and relevant capacity or 'know-how' to decide for themselves on the most appropriate form of ICT for their needs, whether it is a suitcase radio initiative (a local radio initiative explained later in this paper), video productions, or the use of online publishing and access to the worldwide web, in order to provide a Pacific perspective on issues ranging from human rights, health and peace and security.

It is important that in terms of policy design and in direct support, whether at national, regional or international level, the digital 'rich' must remain accountable to the digital 'poor'. ICTs should not merely be used to advance profit and extend corporate entrepreneurship, but support and enable more women's groups and non-government organisations to extend their own outreach, exchange information, and strengthen professional networks.

Media and Communications Developments in Fiji: The Importance of Community Radio

Since mid-70s, the deregulation of the Fiji media industry has given rise to a number of daily newspapers, commercial radio and finally TV in the early 90s. However, the Fiji society has predominantly remained passive consumers rather than directors of the evolution of our media industry.

The deregulation of the radio industry in the mid 1980s and public sector reforms from 1990 onwards in Fiji have resulted in a transformation of the radio field. Due to reduced government funding, radio automation has led to reduced staff rather than to a more efficient or public service-driven programming model. The technical advances have produced more benefits for commercial advertisers rather than better outreach or content for public information and communications. While "jukebox" music formats are the main feature of commercial radio stations, public service broadcasting, which remains resourced through a contractual arrangement with the Government, does not reflect in its programming quota, the Government's commitments to gender equality. "Women's issues" are therefore still relegated to the patriarchal perspective in terms of recipes and entertainment news, altogether staying away from addressing core power issues of gendered relations in the Fiji society.

Fiji's political history of internal conflicts[15] have brought about not only new social and economic problems but also the need for people and communities to be able to articulate their views more freely on social and economic issues of national importance.   However, there is very little participatory radio production and the community radio sector hardly exists in Fiji, which could enable communities, especially rural and under-served communities, to challenge and overcome the politics of race and religion and work together for a peace-centered development framework.

The local NGO, femLINKPACIFIC – Media Initiatives for Women, has advocated and implemented the concept of community media since it was founded in September 2000 – as a women's response to the civil coup of May 2000. femLINKPACIFIC seeks to provide alternative and additional viewpoints to the mainstream media coverage, particularly on issues related to the culture of peace and other issues of concern to Fiji women. Since 2001, it has produced a range of community-based videos and radio-programs and, to intensify its work in the communities, now has its own mobile community radio unit (radio in suitcase). The target beneficiaries of this women's media initiative are rural and semi-urban women whose stories and issues do not make the news or even to dissemination channels of NGO information networks.

Patriarchal and traditional norms of decision-making structures impede women, particularly young women, from the rural and poor communities, from communicating publicly on matters of concern to them. By taking a small mobile radio unit out to women and the communities, femLINKPACIFIC offers women in rural areas a "safe space" to articulate and exchange their viewpoints. Using a low-power transmitter, femLINKPACIFIC encourages women to speak to each other and with their communities.

Recently, in the lead up to the 2006 General Elections in Fiji, femLINKPACIFIC using the suitcase radio[16] to stage a series of focus group pre-broadcast consultations and radio broadcasts in three rural communities, to assist women in these communities to articulate their development priorities and vision statements for the future of the country. This community media initiative, "Not Just Sweet Talk", served as an important platform to once again highlight the marginalization of women's opinions and representation from the mainstream political processes and decision making in Fiji. Interviews with majority of the 25 women candidates showed that even within the many political parties, women remain at the periphery of decision making and so, there is an urgent need to review and reform electoral and other decision making forums to provide a more democratic space for the participation of women, young women and other marginalized groups[17]. Without these interviews, which served to highlight how women's political participation can be sought, it would have been difficult for women's civil society groups to make their point regarding women's marginalization from mainstream political debate heard as effectively.

Once people are able to share their opinions freely and safely, then alone can a society claim to be a true democracy. By working in partnership with NGOs, the government and regional partners, and also working with grassroots women, femLINKPACIFIC has been able to transform

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15 Fiji became independent in 1970. In 1987, it experienced the first coup in the Pacific region, when an elected government was replaced on the grounds did not represent indigenous Fijian interests. Over the years, Fiji reviewed its constitution and reached a consensus on a new constitution in 1997. Following elections, a Labour government was elected and served for a year led by Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister, before being removed by another coup in 2000. Instability, increased poverty, state and non-state violence and violence against women, are some of the current conditions. Internal conflicts include tensions between the government and the military, ethnicized political discourse and intra and inter-ethnic political struggles for power.

16 The suitcase radio broadcasts on 89.2FM using a 100 watt transmitter

17 femTALK E News bulletins 6, 7, 8 –" Not Just Sweet Talk" special bulletins.

radio broadcast content into policy advocacy statements to show how media can be used for political participation of women and to assist in the advancement of gender equality.

Pacific Women's Assertions in the Information Society

Women's movements around the world have repeatedly declared that they favor a communications system, at both national and international levels, based on democratic principles, limiting corporate monopolies in the globalization of telecommunications. Women have also worked towards information and communication societies where development is focused on fundamental human needs and clear social, cultural, economic, and environmental goals, and where priority is given to alleviation of poverty and other inequalities in a way that is environmentally sustainable. Women have committed themselves to taking a gendered approach to all issues, including information and communication technologies.

Despite these global advances, the majority of Pacific Island women remain under- represented in all ICT decision-making structures in their countries and in regional organisations. Within the Pacific Island region, very few women's civil society groups are advocating for the need for some form of ownership and control by women in the communication and ICT fields to ensure that the resources and benefits of the information and communication society are distributed equally between men and women. So, even though there are a number of ICT initiatives today to defend and advance women's rights at local, regional and international levels, women need to ensure a Pacific-specific form of collective participation in ICT policy and decision-making, in order to ensure that it empowers women to take control of their own lives and that of their communities.

Policy advocacy efforts, from women's perspectives, should be used to ensure appropriate legislative and administrative frameworks for ICT development. Among other things, this will enable a diversity of media and ICT forms and recognise the importance of community broadcasting and other community-based alternative media for information dissemination and communication. A diverse and pluralistic media that will enable communities, especially women in their communities, to freely address critical areas of concern through public, commercial and community media forms, is one of the most urgent needs in the Pacific.

ICTs Transformation in the Pacific: Still a Long Way to Go

A scan of existing media and communications legislation in the Pacific Island region highlighted in the SANA report[18] reveals that in most of the 14 Pacific Island countries the development of appropriate telecommunications regulation and policy remains in an embryonic stage with much hinging on the Pacific Islands Regional Digital Strategy and, and often poorly coordinated national endeavors by each Pacific island country to develop a national ICT agenda.

Our experience in femLINKPACIFIC is that expanding the sole women's community radio initiative has been a slow process primarily because an outdated telecommunications framework exists in the Pacific Island region, and there is a need to update legislation by government on community media, including community broadcasting. Because of this gap in legislation, it is more difficult

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18 Sourced from AUS-Aid funded Pacific Media and Communications Facility Situation Analysis and Needs Assessment (SANA) which assesses the capacity of the media, government and civil society sectors to promote good governance through the media. The Pacific Island countries included in the survey are: the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

for new sources of community media to operate using the new ICTs. New community-based media could fill the gap in many Pacific countries, by providing community-based information where there is poor access to information, which may be further worsened by corporatisation of public service broadcasting. But appropriate legislative provision including license fees and a restructuring of the existing regulatory framework, is needed for new, diverse media producers to emerge in the Pacific and to use ICTs now available. Telecom and media restructuring and legislation to cover new media technologies is necessary to enable Fiji to handle new and emerging markets and audiences. There are still over six hundred villages out of the 1,668 villages in Fiji that do not have access to the basic telecommunications services.[19]

The reality of the Pacific Island ICT needs has to be given due consideration in any forum addressing ICT development and existing challenges. These range from the lack of telecommunication infrastructure, including access to telephones and fax services, lack of access to computers and the Internet, the need to establish or strengthen existing media and especially to build the capacity of community based women's media networks. To develop women's media initiatives, there needs to be many forms of positive resourcing, including output-driven training mentorship programmes, which could be delivered by other women's initiatives to built capacity for women in communication and information production in the Pacific.

However, it seems that ICTs in the Pacific are only considered in the context of the Internet and policy makers and civil society groups are failing to look at the most appropriate forms of technology for our people, especially those who live in remote, rural communities, where different kinds of ICTs could greatly improve people's access to information, education and services, and provide an avenue for people's voices to be heard. Even when Women and Media issues were finally included in the revised Pacific Platform for Action in 2004, it was done so without clear articulation of the directions for policy level engagement by women on both new and old media technology forms.

Pacific governments and national women's machineries need to recognise that they must render better policy support to women's media initiatives, especially in the development of an appropriate regulatory framework in response to the ongoing advocacy on community media, which can provide greater opportunity for women to take the media and ICTs into their own hands. The Fiji and the broader Pacific women's movement have to recognise the urgency for broader collaboration and partnership to address the range of outstanding issues resulting from the lack of policy-based engagement and practical use of ICTs as well as the importance of other media, information and communication tools in programme delivery. So an important question is: how to engage more women's rights activists in ICT policy advocacy?

The best way to go forward appears to be to extend support to women's media initiatives. It is important for more civil society groups and particularly women's organisations, to understand the concerns about corporatisation of public service broadcasting and the lack of representation of non-government organisations in National ICT committees. Women need to be appropriately concerned over the lack of women's representation or a gender perspective in media and ICT programs, and devise corrective strategies. Greater partnerships must also be forged among women practitioners within the Pacific ICT sector, such as the WIT or Women in Information Technology, an emergent group of young Pacific women already involved in ICT, and the activities of the Pacific Islands Chapter of the Internet Society.

Such efforts would enable the development of a stronger constituency of gender advocates engaging with ICT and media issues. Questions need to be asked about what has happened to

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19 Fiji Government Draft ICT Policy 2003.

the recommended gender issues noted in ICT policy objectives of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat formulated by the inter-government agency which is responsible for assisting Pacific government, especially to ensure that ICT developments do not produce a gender digital divide in the Pacific Region. Without a more precise and clearly articulated commitment by Pacific governments to new policy frameworks that recognise gender equality concerns, and greater efforts made by women's human rights advocates to ensure gender equality and equity in ICT developments, women in the Pacific will continue to be faced with an emerging ICT arena which discriminates against them, rather than in realizing the potential of new ICT and media technologies for greater gender equality.

Conclusion

Women's participation in and access to all forms of media and ICTs in the Pacific region must be urgently addressed if Pacific women are to avoid being sidelined from recent developments in the media and ICT arena. It is important to ensure that women's perspectives on media and ICTs are heard at all levels of decision-making and in the implementation of ICT policies. In fact, media itself is one of the best ways to mainstream gender perspectives.

Based on femLINKPACIFIC experiences, while there is a need to challenge the existing roles and responsibilities of the mainstream media to improve their portrayal of women in contemporary Pacific society, there is also a need to counter the existing factors inhibiting women's engagement with the mainstream media. There is not only an urgent need to incorporate appropriate gender equality policies in mainstream media institutions but, more importantly, to ensure that women themselves are able to develop, produce and distribute alternative information and content. This can be achieved particularly through community media forms, which can provide women in the Pacific Island region an opportunity to communicate their needs in an effective way.

For successful advocacy towards the above ends, there is a need for capacity building and training for young and rural women to understand program production and also policy issues so that women and their communities can challenge existing personal, institutional and systematic barriers to their active participation in formal decision making structures at all levels. Community-based empowerment training programs, including the provision of appropriate communication tools, will enhance the democratization of existing formal decision making structures, because women can have the means to inform and lobby for their development needs, whether these be in form of voicing direct demands addressed to the governments to meet local infrastructure needs, or through contributing to discussions on constitutional and human rights issues.

Women's movements themselves needs to keep in mind the fact that for those with access to email and Internet, there are hundreds of other women on the other side of the digital divide without access to these technologies or even simpler forms of media and communications, and who continue to be marginalized. There is an urgent need for Pacific women to discuss how they can better work together to address the existing ICT gaps facing women in the different communities in which women's movements may work. These movements must also review how it can be ensured that there is the sharing of information power in new and innovative ways, especially between urban and rural women.

In the development of ICT policy and regulatory frameworks in the Pacific, there needs to be an immediate switch from the top-down approach to one where information from the village or local community level, including perspectives from young women and men, and disabled persons, are incorporated into all levels of policy planning and implementation, to ensure a people-centered

approach to development. This alone will ensure that appropriate and accessible ICTs are available to assist in conflict prevention, peace building, and promotion of gender equality.

Aside from the provision of appropriate ICT training (which take into account regional and national needs and capacities) it is also vital that women's media initiatives have access to the necessary resources to enable greater content development, production and dissemination, including the use of local languages and dialects, as a way to protect and preserve indigenous and traditional cultures especially important in the Pacific Island region.

Community media producers also need assistance to establish and maintain websites not only to increase awareness of their learning through their efforts, but to also create linkages with likeminded organisations. All these efforts together can help develop connections between the appropriate use of information and communications technology and the globally identified concerns for gender equality, for instance, the 12 Critical Areas of Concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality advocates need to strengthen all efforts to build on the gains in the 'Women and the Media' part in the Beijing Platform for Action and in ICT developments, to ensure equal access to all forms for communication for all women.

In the Pacific, all stakeholders must get serious about investing in appropriate ICT infrastructure to make the new technologies work for development, enabling all citizens to participate in and benefit from the global developments in that the ICT sector. It is important to engender the Pacific Regional ICT Policy, and respective ICT policies of Island governments in a manner that can ensure that they are enabling and contributing to increasing women's access to all forms – traditional, community and new – of media and ICTs.

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