

Introduction

This paper is based on the perceptions of a group of rural indigenous Fijian women regarding their daily needs and challenges at a point in time when their traditionally subsistence way of life intersects with an aggressive market economy. My reading of their responses is viewed through the lenses of training and development responses, in particular, ways in which those responsible for development could work in an empowering manner. My way of addressing this issue was to live amongst the group in question, to immerse myself in their daily lives, to listen carefully to their perceptions and to offer them my skills in achieving a development outcome. This is also the story of the women's lives, allowing their daily lived experience and voices to enter into the public arena. I was also interested in reflecting on what I learn as an indigenous researcher who returns to her mother's village in the position of outside/insider.

Women's daily needs and challenges

When I returned to my mother's village I discovered that there were many aspects of the women's way of life had not changed. Their families, *vanua*, church and school continue to be central institutions in their lives. Each of these institutions, especially the family (including the extended family), *vanua* and the church continue to make enormous demands of the women's time and resources. The women continue to value these institutions but they want the demands on them reduced. The reason they want them reduced is because they have entered into a market economy in which they use, in the main, their traditional skills of farming to produce surplus produce they can sell for profit. The daily work involved in producing this surplus is physically demanding and, as other researchers have found in similar contexts, it leaves these women with no personal time as they do it in addition to traditional demands. While the women value their traditional institutions they resent that they have little say in communal decisions because these are dominated by the men. If a goal of organizations such as the United Nations is to have women involved in decision making at the national level then women need support in making this happen at the grass root level.

The women want the money that comes from the market economy because they want more efficient homes that can withstand cyclones, are easy to clean and have better sanitation, light and water supply. They want money so they can send their children to school because they know that education leads to better jobs and more money for their families. They recognize that leadership, both male and female, is important in achieving these changes.

Many indigenous Fijians begin their education in local village schools but move on to urban centers for better educational opportunities. There is a sense of awakening amongst Fijian communities of the importance of education for a better and secure future. A prominent trend is for families who can afford it to relocate to urban centers for better education opportunities. Many indigenous rural villages today benefit from remittances from their urban based relatives.

Negotiating the old and the new

The impact of modernization, particularly the influence of the market economy, has been significant and has both challenged and complicated much of the women's daily-lived experiences. In this contemporary Fijian village, there are old perspectives and assumptions and values that retain their vibrancy, their credibility and influence but because of the impact of the outside world, there are new ways. For these village women, this has meant contradictions between the new ways and the old ways and they are confronted with negotiating these new challenges and at the same time finding meaningful ways to sustain their families and livelihood and community connections. The women find it challenging to negotiate between the individualistic and materialistic stance of a market economy and their communal way of life. These village women are further disadvantaged by traditional institutions and infrastructures that are patriarchal where men hold power and have access to land and other natural resources. Although the women are the economic backbone of the community, they have little space and opportunity to be active decision makers in the socio-economic and political affairs of the village.

There is a moral responsibility for local indigenous women scholars and leaders to reconnect and talk with rural women on a whole range of issues that are crucial to their lives as women. Local women's knowledge is grounded in their experience, values and practices and when women leaders understand this knowledge, they actually bring to the core and privilege the local women as knower. This is profoundly a political act which should be advocated by women leaders at the grass root level.

Creating spaces for women

Time spent with this group of women has provided the space and opportunity for the women to exercise their decision-making skills and power through the women's workshop and the women's own fishpond project. It has illustrated that it is vital to commit time, energy and resources to fully understand and validate local women's knowledge, values and practices. This may provide a more meaningful and authentic platform on which to develop women's empowerment and development initiatives. Listening to village women's stories can assist outsiders, including myself, understand the things that really matter to them: their actual needs and priorities.

Providing the space and opportunity for these women to tell their stories is an acknowledgement and respect for their being and existence. One mark of a liberating process is to help these women tell and share their stories in a critical manner. According to Freire (1970) when people are not free to speak, silence is oppression and in indigenous rural villages women live under a culture of silence because Fijian traditional norms and social infrastructures do not place women on an equal footing with the men folk. Yet the women in Marama Village showed that when facilitation is made available for them to meet together, to listen to each other and to share common concerns and visions, they can act together in ways that are empowering for them. The safe and secure nature of the relationship that had evolved allowed the women to be very open and honest with one another as they shared about their daily lives in the village. This culminated in an emotional but powerful situation during the women's workshop where the women confessed to each other about their shortcomings and weaknesses; and forgiving each other in the process. This to me was the psychological and emotional clean slate and foundation that, for this group, was necessary for change to occur. I found that the new spaces and opportunities that were created, empowered the women to have a sense of ownership, comradeship and control over much of the needs, challenges and opportunities we had shared. Through the process of critical reflection, the women were able to interrogate and understand their daily-lived experiences so as to take ownership and control over these experiences. This empowered them for collective action, the first was a village clean up day where all the women under the leadership of the village nurse spent the whole day to clear, burn and bury rubbish throughout the whole village. This triggered a chain reaction where the women were more conscious in keeping their home surroundings neat and tidy. Shrubs were planted and animals were kept out of the village green. This collaborative effort provided the social glue for the women's empowerment and also became a tool for further collective action. For most of the women this provided a boost to their self-esteem and dignity and provided the necessary space and platform for them to play out their potential and capability.

The other project was the women's own fishpond, which provided space and opportunity for the women to engage in the practical and challenging aspects of empowering themselves. The mere fact that they were able to talk about their plans and ideas for the fishpond gave them a sense of engagement and influence. Consequently, the women experienced some form of control as they sat together and collaboratively discussed issues pertaining to the fishpond. The initial funds I successfully applied for on behalf of the women were powerful evidence that proved to the women that their ideas of a fishpond had counted. As a researcher, I played a catalytic and supportive role and cheered the women on as they engaged themselves in their own fishpond project. Finally, the women took control of their resources when they decided to join together to keep control of the money they made from their own fishpond rather than handing it over to the men.

A key factor in the success of the women's undertaking was that they started with a project where all the required input was available locally in the village. The fishpond was small enough to be managed by the women themselves and carried no complicated issues and it was a project that met their basic food needs. A crucial aspect of the project was that the women had informed the men in the traditional manner that they had plans to start a fish-breeding project. So the men gave their blessings for the women's own fishpond. This gesture was significant because although the fishpond was focused on women's empowerment, the women acknowledged local traditional protocols and the important role that their men had to play in this project. Because this was a Fijian village community, the women realized that they needed the cooperation of the whole village to make the venture a success. The women invited the village men to be chief guests at the first fish harvest where the men gave their blessings with a donation of \$700 to the women's project. Respect and reciprocity are major tenets of the Fijian way of life and I found that the women still respected traditional protocols. This suggests that any collaborative action research needs to be sensitive to local contexts and social networks and to support the women in managing the process for themselves.

Traditions and customs are important components of the Fijian village way of life hence it is important to engender development and training within the context of this traditional way of life. Like most of their Pacific counterparts, village women in Fiji have lived their lives within the traditional context of their village community and it is only wise to engender development and progress within this traditional context. The village women know how to maneuver and weave progress and development challenges within this traditional context. Working with the women, clearly demonstrates that the local culture of our people is not necessarily a stumbling block to development and progress as suggested by dominant models of development. On the contrary, local traditions and culture are vital starting blocks or springboards to progressive socio-economic activities and development. The existing village institutions ought to be used as platforms or learning arena where the village's patriarchal system will be 'metamorphised' in such a way where men are engaged in communal activities that are conducive to the process of conscientisation and power sharing with their women.

There is a need to make sure that the development processes that we engage the women in, will reclaim their confidence and rebuild their lives spiritually, emotionally, socially, economically and politically. If we work with no hidden agendas or professional aloofness but a genuine heart to really make a difference in the lives of these women, then there is no need for these village women to live a life of hopelessness. With the same token we must be accountable for the corrective measures that will be required should these development programs fail to bring about the intended social economic and political outcomes

Lessons for village women's empowerment

The collective experiences of the women have revealed basic and challenging insights into women's empowerment at the village level. As the fieldwork progressed, issues of empowerment became a vital part of our collaborative efforts and these ranged from efforts to facilitate women's empowerment to efforts focusing on sensitizing men to gender issues.

First, these village women are not passive victims of development programmes, rather they are aware and actively engaged in their family and communal lives and their future. They do think about and reflect on the challenges they face in the new market economy. The women are actively engaged in providing sustenance for their families, to gain control over economic, social and political resources. Through their increasing knowledge, skills and communal effort as part of this project, the women have been able to improve aspects of their livelihood.

Second, greater socio-economic independence and security would enable women to achieve even more power. This is vital as women need a socio-economic power base and a secure platform from which to work from. Such a platform will heighten women's progress towards gender empowerment, equality and progress. The Fijian village has a strong patriarchal communal system that has made women invisible and inaudible in the village community. Women in Marama Village put in long hours of hard work on a daily basis, yet they remain in the socio-economic and political shadows of their husbands. Therefore, there needs to be more emphasis on how women can be empowered to enhance their economic enterprise for greater independence. This was evident amongst the village women after they accumulated F\$1,420 from their fishpond project and their ownership of this amount provided a quiet confidence amongst the women. The women in turn realized that this amount also provided them some effective bargaining and negotiating tool with the men. During the field work, the village women displayed much skill in negotiating their economic independence amongst the village men. More research needs to be done to help women interrogate village cultural norms when these violate women's sense of individuality and fairness. Women also need to interrogate cultural norms that disempower and disadvantage them in their own village community.

Third, education and training would provide women with the relevant skills and tools required to live independently in society (e.g. skills for income generating activities). For example, the village women boosted their independence through the knowledge and skills that the village women gained from managing their own fishpond. Thus,

development projects must focus on appropriate education and training that specifically caters for women's needs in their rural landscape. To break the cycle of drudgery and to cure the problems that keep rural village women from bettering their lot, action must be taken on several different fronts.

It is also vital to understand that women may begin with different starting points: economic strategies, political strategies, social strategies or a combination of these strategies (Murthy, 2001). Ideally, the choice of these starting points should be defined by the women themselves.

Fourth, women experience power relationship in multiple ways and in various levels and contexts. In this village the dominant power relationship is between the village men and women at both family and communal level ; and this is perpetuated in the institution of the *vanua*, the church and the family. Women in Marama Village need empowerment strategies that highlight the exploitative character of these power relations as well as strategies that provide women with the impetus to interrogate these power relationships. However, like other Fijian villages, it was not uncommon for the women in this village to focus on the positive aspects of this power relationship. Most of the women would do this out of respect for the men. For these village women, a necessary prerequisite to this interrogation was cooperative security and a power base from which women can work. During the field work, the women found strength in each other as a group as they managed their fishpond over a period of two years.

Finally, the empowerment of women cannot be planned for in a top-down manner. This work suggests that the process of empowerment ought to be context specific and grounded in the women's socio-economic experiences, practices and beliefs. This guarantees an empowerment approach that is genuine and meaningful for the women themselves. It is also important to work with the men on gender issues, so that spaces for women's empowerment are expanded (Murthy, 2001). Women's empowerment is enhanced by support rather than opposition from men.

Implications for professional practice

The study has illustrated that it is critical for those who live and relate to these village women, particularly professionals in positions of power and privilege to engage in critical self reflection to find out what will work for this women at the village level. Building partnerships with the women through dialogue is an important principle for success. This dialogue provides an initial platform of cordial relationship and negotiation between the women and the development worker. Such dialogue needs to occur at policy level as well as during program/project design and implementation. A major challenge here is for development workers to articulate in a very concrete manner, the ways in which women's needs, benefits and rights at the village level are relevant to national development. It is vital to involve all stakeholders in dialogue on development objectives while local women's organizations and advocacy groups can

play a key role in setting the directions for country strategies and in the design of development activities. Civil society organizations can play an important role in holding partner institutions accountable to close the gaps between policy commitments and practice (Hunt, 2004). In order to make sustainable progress towards women's development and empowerment, there is a need to make long term commitments to development activities and projects for these Fijian village women. These commitments are also important for continuing the trust and the collaborative relationship forged between the researcher and the village women.

This project clearly showed that the use of participatory approaches is important in building indigenous women's self confidence as well as strengthening women's leadership capacity. The provision of leadership training for women is also a key feature in successful development programmes for women. In others, providing women with skills training has an empowering impact on women's decision making capacity. Women's decision making capacity is enhanced when combined with participatory planning and monitoring processes and this was clearly illustrated in the village women's monitoring of their fishpond project. The women's active involvement in the project demonstrated increased participation in decision making at both personal and group level. It is unfortunate that the project was only run on a small scale.

Supporting these village women as agents of social progress and development in their community enhances progress towards gender empowerment and gender equality. This support will then be provided by the women themselves when their organizational capacity is strengthened. Additionally, institutions such as the *vanua* and the church will need to provide an enabling socio-economic and cultural environment that will enhance development and empowerment initiatives for the local village women. These listed practices are not 'magic bullets'. However, they provide the basis for effective and sustainable development and empowerment for women.

Reflections of an indigenous researcher

As I moved between Australia and Fiji in the period of the study (2002-2005), I began to see my own role in the project quite differently. Reflecting over my diary entries in the earlier phase, I noticed that I was both anxious regarding how to be of help and also a little too aware of the additional knowledge and skill that I had and which I considered to be lacking in the village. There was a temptation to 'save' my mother's village from falling into bad times. Additionally, my view of leadership implicit in some of my early reflections was based on the idea of the leader as expert or educated person who was recognized as a 'man' by the village men and elders. As I grew to really be able to listen to and respect the knowledge and capacity for strategic thinking in the women, and in further reflection on the energy and capacity to understand emerged, it was also tempting to romanticize the women as not in need of

leadership at all, but as embodying all the required virtues and skills for change in the globalised world. However, the women themselves and my further reflection suggested there was a need for a leader – one who can act as catalyst.

I found the metaphor of catalyst useful because it allowed for agency on the part of all concerned. There is a need for knowledge of the outside practices – those that sustain the state -seen most clearly here in the fishpond project. However, the insider position provides access and understanding that may be difficult for someone with little knowledge of the culture. As both an insider and outsider, I realized the enormous responsibility and accountability I had to respect but at the same time to create the space and opportunity to dialogue with the women regarding their socio-economic experiences and progress. Part of this process was to encourage women to perceive their knowledge, beliefs, values and practices as important, and as an indigenous researcher to validate these experiences. Therefore, much of the interaction and discussion with the women were based on this process. It is healthy for the insider-outsider herself to balance not privileging either the outside knowledge or the inner relationships. The other thing the catalyst position does is to allow for interplay between the women's knowledge of practices that have stood the test of time and my own knowledge as an educated indigenous woman with experience of the wider world. Consequently, the people can respect the position of catalyst because it acknowledges their own lifestyle as not inferior or to be superseded. The life of the village woman has intrinsic worth and it is worth sustaining.

Finally, as I reflect on this study, I am grateful for the opportunity to interact and to learn from the lives of these village women. The study has been the scholastic seed out of which has emerged an obligation to continue to help these women meet their needs and challenges and be part of the fulfillment of their dreams. This is the human face of academic fieldwork. I return to the women in Marama Village to continue to build on what the women and I have been able to achieve from this journey. I am also contented and humbled that my interaction and relationship with the women has brought not only hope and alternative perspectives about the world and themselves but also bring an enjoyable change to an often, limited daily life that these village women live.