

# The Fiji Women's Rights Movement input into the discussion on: "How to create and maintain civil society space? What works?"

*Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> June 2015*

## **Background**

Fiji Women's Rights Movement established in 1986 is a feminist women's rights organisation that practices principles of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. FWRM's work is geared towards removing discrimination against women through institutional reforms and attitudinal changes. We strive to empower, unite, and provide leadership opportunities for women in Fiji, especially for emerging young leaders.

## **Introduction**

Fiji's complex political landscape has been compounded by a complicated legal environment, with the development of more than 300 decrees since 2006. These decrees, in addition to existing laws, have sometimes advanced rights, but more often constrained rights and inhibited the participation of civil society in policymaking. Women have historically been marginalised in accessing justice, a situation compounded by Fiji's current legal environment.

Our experience has shown that governments tend to see civil society organisations as threats rather than as strategic partners in advancing human rights for all. As a result of this, civil society work have become more restricted through the shrinking of spaces (based on funding limitations), by government policies, laws and actions. Whilst these have become a concern, most negative attention has been attributed towards organisations or key actors who work in the area of human rights, natural resources and those of justice and law reform.

Civil Societies play a critical role in not only being the 'eyes and ears' on the ground but they over time have become the "voices of the voiceless".

Spaces had to be intentionally created and protected to specifically address issues of women's needs and ensure they had spaces to voice these concerns. Further to this, civil society organisations recognised the need to maintain existing partnerships and spaces for the movement to be sustainable. In a country that has been known to be politically unstable, and a cultural environment where women have continued to be ignored despite the progressive roles they have played in our country, has resulted in spaces being purposefully created and maintained just so that the status quo is challenged.

This resulted in eight key women's non- governmental organisations and networks

collaborating as the Fiji Women's Forum and the Fiji Young Women's Forum. Both Forums are spaces of historic and critical conversations among diverse women, which have sparked a number of collaborative civil society-led processes to enhance the participation of women in national democratic processes. The co-convenors of both the Forums remain in close contact and collaboration in amplifying the voices of diverse women, as well as promoting their meaningful participation at all levels.

The idea of collaboration and partnerships addresses issues linked to funding limitations and sharing of limited resources and funding pool and further strengthens organisations working together for a common goal.

Not only are the forums great examples of creating and maintaining civil society spaces, it was also about creating a safe space for women to come together to share not only their experiences, but highlight issues and develop strategies relevant to their daily lives. Spaces such as this not only strengthen relationships but through collaboration, sharing of resources and expertise in advancing issues of Women's Human Rights has often resulted in the sustainability of safe civil society spaces.

Detailed descriptions of strategies, background and experiences of both forums are highlighted by former FWRM's Executive Director, Virisila Buadromo's article, "Fiji The constitutional process: a view from the Fiji Women's Rights Movement."<sup>1</sup>

The two examples that will be highlighted in this discussion are that of the Fiji Women's Forum and also the Fiji Young Women's Forum.

### **Fiji Women's Forum (FWF)**

In April 2012, the Fiji Women's Forum was convened by the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, FemlinkPacific, the National Council of Women and the Soqosoqo Vakamarama iTaukei. The objective of the Fiji Women's Forum (FWF) was to give women's organisations space to collectively develop strategies to increase women's participation in constitutional development, electoral reform, and ultimately increase the number of women elected to parliament upon a return to democratic rule. To date, there have been five national forums hosted by the FWF around thematic areas such as enhancing women's equal participation in Fiji's democratisation processes, women's electoral participation and women in local governance. The Forum has had a total outreach of approximately 3,000 women.

A first evaluative study of the Fiji Women's Forum was conducted in 2015, which showed the FWF's work has been an emergent, rather than a "settled" program. The FWF has worked to influence national level events as well as working with women and communities who are connected to the FWF co convening organisations' constituencies.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cr.org/sites/default/files/accord25\\_fiji.pdf](http://www.cr.org/sites/default/files/accord25_fiji.pdf)

“... the FWF has made significant achievements in a relatively short period of time. The four organisations that came together to form the FWF had to find a way to work collectively and constructively as one entity to represent the women of Fiji, in the face of a volatile political landscape. The FWF had to react quickly to this fast moving and unpredictable process, at the same time a bringing women from diverse backgrounds and perspectives together to develop a shared mandate in relation to women's leadership and participation in decision making.” *(Extracted from the "Fiji Women's Forum Impact Assessment Final Report, 2015 - Avega Bishop & Elizabeth Hogan)*

### **Fiji Young Women's Forum (FYWF)**

The impact of military coups or coups in general in Fiji has had a negative effect on youths. Many of the youth population in Fiji have grown up in an environment of coups and as such over time with the restrictive environment in Fiji, they have become disengaged from political process and activism because it is something that they cannot relate to.

The inception of the Fiji Young Women's Forum was specifically to discuss some of these key challenges to young women's engagement. Following in the footsteps of the Fiji Women's Forum, the creation of the Fiji Young Women's Forum was unique. This is because the space was created by young women, for young women.

The Fiji Young Women's Forum is convened by Diverse Voices and Action for Equality (DIVA), Emerging Leaders Forum Alumni (ELFA), Young Women Producers and Broadcasters- FemlinkPacific and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The Forum brought together young women leaders and activists from Fiji to discuss barriers and strategies to young women's meaningful participation and representation in Fiji's democratisation process. It also reaffirmed young women's power as implementers and contributors of positive change, decision makers, partners and leaders of today and the future. The forum builds on the initial Fiji Women's Forum and a rich tradition of activism of Fijian women throughout our national history and is committed to representing young women throughout the country.

To date, there have been three national forums hosted by the FYWF. The objectives of the forums are as follows:

#### ***First FYWF (8- 10 November 2013)***

- Up-skill a diverse group of young Fijian women on the fundamental tenants of the democratization process and the Fiji's electoral process
- Map current work undertaken by young women on the political process and identify barriers to young women's substantive political participation
- Develop key strategies to lobby key policy/decision makers, candidates and political parties for the inclusion of young women's priority issues/concerns

and recommendations in their agenda

***Second FYWF (14-16 March 2014)***

- To Encourage and Influence active political participation of young women to vote in the 2014 General Elections in Fiji
- To Empower young women, to lobby political parties and decision-makers for better representation and inclusion of young women's issues

***Third FYWF (26-29th November 2014)***

- To review and evaluate the strategies undertaken by the Fiji Young Women's Forum and discuss the key successes of young women's political participation at the local and national level and to use the lessons learned from the FYWF activities to develop collaborative strategies for the ongoing lobby of policy makers and for the inclusion of young women's perspectives and concerns
- To evaluate strategies used by the FYWF in influencing political party candidates/parties/manifestos using the outcomes statement/outcomes declaration and actively contributing to decision making processes and/or policy documents
- To discuss and evaluate the effectiveness and impacts of young women's My Guide to Voting advocacy and awareness campaigns leading to increased public awareness and support of gender equality
- To document how FYWF participants have influenced and actively contributed to influencing political party candidates, networks, processes and official documents and statements.
- To develop collaborate strategies for ongoing lobbying with policy makers for the inclusion of young women's issues
- Young women successfully advocate for increased accountability by national leaders to young women's concerns are recognized and valued in formal and informal leadership roles.
- To discuss and document the agreed discussions of the young women's age definition consultation, this will provide the basis of the Young Women's age definition position paper

The FYWF has had a total outreach of approximately 7,000 young women.

**How was space maintained and created:**

- Learning how to work together and the willingness to engage in difficult conversations.
- Strengthening collaboration and partnerships within civil society, networks and community groups.
- Having constructive interactions with decision makers and with women

- from diverse backgrounds.
- Building on the progresses and ensuring that everyone is working towards the same goal with strategies being monitored and changed when required.
  - Have a realistic yet flexible timeline and plan.
  - Being persistent and having a united action in all settings and situations
  - Engaging with key strategic people and building and working on strengthening those relationships.
  - Building coalitions with new partners and networks.
  - Having access to networks and resources enabled spaces to be created and maintained.
  - “Realising the need to work with an emergent process of building a women’s movement at the same time being able to respond to political processes” *(Extracted from the "Fiji Women's Forum Impact Assessment Final Report, 2015 - Avega Bishop & Elizabeth Hogan)*

#### **Limitations and challenges:**

- Limited funding
- Decrees and laws (media decree, electoral decree to name a few)
- The political environment was unstable, threatening and was not enabling for people to speak freely regarding their human rights violation.
- Shifting developmental priorities

#### **Recommendations:**

1. There is a need for civil society to work in enabling and safe environments and civil society spaces needs to be maintained (and created) to ensure that human rights needs and issues are addressed.
2. Recognise the crucial role of civil society organisations in the promotion of the rule of law and accountability, and the protection of human rights.
3. Recognise the role that civil society has and continues to play in empowering persons belonging to minorities and vulnerable groups.
4. Ensure that the capacity of civil society is not undermined and they are encouraged to operate free from intimidation, hindrance and insecurity.
5. Recognise the role of civil society organisations in the promotion and protection of human rights and the rule of law and of any other relevant decisions.
6. The international community and key actors can play an important role in defending political spaces for civil society action as the freedoms of assembly, association and expressions are not only fundamental human

rights but are essential components in a democratic society.

7. To sustain united action towards a common goal
8. Essential to work together with key groups who have the influence and mandate of their communities and works within the Human Rights framework
9. Ensure support (Financial, Human and Technical) is made available and is accessible for civil society organisations working in restrictive and demanding environments.
10. Replicate similar initiatives such as the FWF and FYWF, into the wider community to reach a diverse group of women and to further influence decision makers

#### **Useful Links and Resources:**

1. Buadromo, V., 2014. Fiji The constitutional process: a view from the Fiji Women's Rights Movement. [http://www.cr.org/sites/default/files/Accord25\\_Fiji.pdf](http://www.cr.org/sites/default/files/Accord25_Fiji.pdf)
2. Fiji Women's Rights Movement, 2012. Herstory: celebrating 25 years of balancing the scales. <http://www.fwrn.org.fj/content/publications/fwrnherstory19842011final.pdf>
3. Chetty, T., 2013. Fiji Democracy and Women's Rights. <http://devpolicy.org/tara-chetty-fiji-democracy-and-womens-rights-20130806/>

#### **Additional links:**

- I. [https://books.google.com.fj/books?id=ia8\\_rr\\_KyCUC&pg=PA123&lpg=PA123&q=Fiji+women%27s+rights+movement+maintaining+civil+society+spaces&source=bl&ots=JImSzY-jB0&sig=WOaGZG2CK3v8A9-gQ-mwEf2uNg0&hl=en&sa=X&ei=GhWSVc6YGuGomgXR\\_6igDA&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Fiji%20women's%20rights%20movement%20maintaining%20civil%20society%20spaces&f=false](https://books.google.com.fj/books?id=ia8_rr_KyCUC&pg=PA123&lpg=PA123&q=Fiji+women%27s+rights+movement+maintaining+civil+society+spaces&source=bl&ots=JImSzY-jB0&sig=WOaGZG2CK3v8A9-gQ-mwEf2uNg0&hl=en&sa=X&ei=GhWSVc6YGuGomgXR_6igDA&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Fiji%20women's%20rights%20movement%20maintaining%20civil%20society%20spaces&f=false)
- II. <http://www.minorityrights.org/download.php?id=1202>
- III. <http://feeds.feedburner.com/devpolicypodcast>
- IV. <http://apwld.org/cso-statement-on-civil-society-voice-and-inclusion-of->

women- with-disabilities/

- V. <http://www.dlprog.org/opinions/creative-expression-and-women-s-empowerment-in-the-pacific.php>
- VI. <https://www.iwda.org.au/assets/files/1.-Funding-Leadership-Opportunities-for- Women-Factsheet.pdf>
- VII. <http://www.pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/Public-Perceptions-of-Women-in-Leadership-Fiji-Research.pdf>
- VIII. <http://press.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Situating+Women/10051/ch06.html>
- IX. [http://www.cr.org/sites/default/files/LimitsandPossibilitiesforCivilSociety\\_1996\\_ENG\\_0.pdf](http://www.cr.org/sites/default/files/LimitsandPossibilitiesforCivilSociety_1996_ENG_0.pdf)
- X. <http://theconversation.com/fijis-media-still-struggling-to-regain-free-and-fair-space-40765>
- XI. <https://www.iwda.org.au/assets/files/1.-Funding-Leadership-Opportunities-for- Women-Factsheet.pdf>

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