



Where are the women?

In Fiji and the broader Pacific region, governments, regional organisations and development agencies alike maintain a history of collecting data at the national rather than local level. Not surprisingly, this trend has spilled over to the collection of data on women's representation and participation. As we witness the commitment to gender equality rise on regional and national agendas, the apparent apathy towards understanding the role and contribution of women in and to local level governments and therefore to basic service delivery raises the question: Where are the women at this level? Should we be taking more notice?

Preliminary research undertaken by the Strengthening Women's Participation in Municipal Governance (SWPMG) Project in Fiji suggests that women are significantly under-represented in local government leadership and senior management positions. Why is this so and what can be done about it? The SWPMG Project partners *Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) Pacific Project* and *International Women's Development Agency (IWDA)* kickoff the discussion.

There are many spheres of decision making that women are yet to conquer. Of all these, local government is possibly one of the most important, yet ignored areas in the gender, governance & development debate in the Pacific.

Introduction

There has been considerable government commitment and activity led by women's agencies in the last ten years designed to promote the participation of women in leadership and decision-making roles in the Pacific. Yet, it is evident that very little attention has been given to progressing women's representation and participation in local government despite the opportunities it presents as the level of government closest to the community and therefore potentially most accessible to women.

Direct reference to the role of local governments continues to remain elusive in international, regional and national gender strategies and plans, including the *Pacific Platform for Action on the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality (PPfA)*.¹ When mentioned, Local Government is seen as a pathway to increasing the number of women in decision making positions. The potential for Local Government to progress the empowerment of women and their role in addressing critical issues such as urban poverty, local economic development, health, violence against women, peace and security and climate change among others is strikingly absent from program strategies and policy objectives.

In most Pacific island countries, local governments are significant employers at the community level and have responsibility for basic service delivery including public infrastructure, transportation, local economic development, physical planning, water and sanitation. Local governments are therefore well placed to raise awareness on gender issues, provide spaces for women to be heard in the formal decision making processes concerning their basic living conditions, and opportunities for women's knowledge and skills to be acknowledged and utilised in local governance.

The participation of women in local government will become even more critical as the sector faces the challenges of economic recovery, critical skills shortages, an ageing workforce and early retirement of the sector's managerial level. Without women, the sector simply does not have the depth of talent and capacity to survive.

And that's before we get to the gender equality issue.

Current Statistics for Fiji

- Less than 25% of local government employees are women, with representation as low as 7.6% in two councils
- The majority of women employees hold support positions within the administration, finance and health service areas
- Only 16% of chief executive officers are women. In fact there has only even been three women CEOs in the history of local government in Fiji
- Women in senior management positions represent less than 8% of the local government workforce
- Only 2% of local government field staff are women
- Women represented only 14.5% of elected councillors in 2008 and 3 councils have never had women councillors
- 1 out of 7 Special Administrators are women²
- The average number of women on government boards and committees is less than 20%, well below the national and regional target and recent figures indicates numbers have decreased

Background

Women's representation and participation in Pacific governments at all levels is an essential step to progressing gender equality and genuine democracy in the Pacific. As signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), all but three Pacific island countries have committed to eliminating discrimination against women in national political and public life. Despite these commitments, women's representation in Pacific parliaments is currently the lowest in the world at 4.2%. Global trends indicate that whilst women are still underrepresented at all levels of government, women's political representation at the local level is gradually increasing and in most cases is higher than at the national level.

¹ The *Revised Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality 2005 to 2015: A Regional Charter* is the lead strategic document in the Pacific region with thirteen critical areas identified to promote the advancement of Pacific women. It is the Pacific's response to the *Beijing Platform for Action* (1995).

² In February 2009, the Interim Government of Fiji appointed Special Administrators to act as the governing head of municipal councils following the expiry of the term of elected councillors and deferment of local elections

Table 1: World and Regional Averages of Women in National and Local Government, as at 2008

Region	% Female Parliamentarians	% Female Councillors	Higher/Lower
Nordic countries	41.4	no info	-
Europe	19.0	23.9	Higher
Latin America	20.3	26.1	Higher
Central America		24.1	Higher
North America		no info	-
Africa	17.3	30.1	Higher
Asia	16.9	17.5	Higher
Pacific (not incl. PICs)	12.9		Higher
Pacific (excluding Australia & NZ)	4.2	7.0*	Higher
Fiji	12.6	14.5	Higher
Middle East & Mediterranean	9.6	2.1	Lower
World – compared to 30% target	17.7	20.9	Higher

Source: UCLG, 2005 (dated 2008); IPU, UNDP and PIFS, 2008; CLGF, 2008* (incomplete info)

Table 2: Women in Local Government in Fiji, as at 2008

Area Name	Town/City Council	Local Councillors						Local CEOs	
		1999-2002		2002-2005		2005-2008		2008	
		F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Ba	Town	2	13	2	13	2	13		M
Labasa	Town	0	12	0	12	1	11		M
Lami	Town	2	10	3	9	2	10	F	
Lautoka	City	1	15	2	14	3	13		M
Levuka	Town	3	5	1	7	4	4		M
Nadi	Town	2	13	1	14	3	11		M
Nasinu	Town	-	-	1	20	4	17		M
Nausori	Town	0	12	0	12	0	12		M
Savusavu	Town	0	9	0	9	1	8		M
Sigatoka	Town	-	-	-	-	0	10		M
Suva	City (Capital)	3	17	2	18	3	17		M
Tavua	Town	0	9	0	9	0	9	F	
Total		13	115	12	137	23	135	2	10
% of Women		10.1%		8.0%		14.5%		16.6%	

In 2008, the CLGF Pacific Project undertook a regional survey of its nine member countries to determine the number of women elected and appointed in local government across the Pacific. Besides presenting a picture of representation significantly below the global target of 30 percent, the survey also revealed the inadequacy of national data on women's representation and participation in local government. Data on the number of women elected and employed within the sector is essential to inform discussion and strategies going forward.

In Fiji, figures on women employed in local government in particular have not been systematically collected and there is currently no provision either through the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Fiji Local Government Association, local governments themselves or various sector organisations to address this. Surprisingly, it has also been CLGF's experience that some councils are reluctant to provide figures on female staff numbers: this does not support efforts to develop an accurate profile of women in local government in Fiji.

The SWPMG Project has taken up the challenge to address this lack of data as well as profile attitudes, barriers to increasing women's participation and representation and strategies to overcoming barriers through a national study titled 'Equality in Local Government'. The study will more clearly define the areas for consideration and development of local gender action plans and policies.



The SWPMG national survey on equality and local government provided some valuable pointers on how to approach the development and promotion of gender training & capacity building initiatives in Fiji.

Objectives

The Strengthening Women's Participation in Municipal Governance (SWPMG) Project is designed to respond to three key dimensions: increase the participation of women in leadership and management roles in local government; increase women and men's role in local government planning processes and increase the capacity of councils to ensure service delivery is gender sensitive.

The Project will achieve this through the following objectives:

- Raise awareness of the benefits of increasing the participation of women in leadership roles in local government
- Undertake research on the current status of women in local government
- Establish a national 'women in local government network'
- Encourage councils to adopt equitable and appropriate human resource practices
- Encourage councils to adopt gender aware policies, consultation processes and programs to improve planning processes and service delivery outcomes

‘If local government is to meet the needs of both women and men, it must build on the experiences of both women and men, through an equal representation at all levels and in all fields of decision making, covering the wide range of responsibilities of local governments’ (IULA Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government)

Business Case

There is both an equity and real business case to increasing the participation of women in management and leadership roles in local government. Fiji is signatory to a number of international conventions and regional plans and policies that detail women’s rights to participate in decision-making at all levels for reasons of equality, democracy and legitimacy. Fiji has a responsibility to promote women’s involvement in local governance to ensure women attain their basic human rights.

The composition of the management and leadership of local councils needs to reflect the diversity of the community they are serving to promote understanding of the different community needs and priorities, which in turn leads to greater equality and creativity in the way services are delivered and prosperity for the community as a whole. Local government policy and programs that are designed without full consideration of the different needs, aspirations, skills and capacity of diverse women and men in their community are not likely to meet the needs of the entire community, and may in fact discriminate against and disadvantage certain community members, in particular women.

Some of the reasons involving women makes good sense include:

- Women constitute at least half the population in any community, and therefore have the right to have an equal say in the way that cities/towns and local governments are organised and managed
- Women represent a strong pool of talent and can bring a range of knowledge and skills to local government
- Women are considered good communicators and have different leadership styles that are often more inclusive and sensitive to different opinions and views
- Women have different interests and sensitivity to community needs and issues such as families, access to basic services such as water and electricity, housing, health



services, waste management and public transport

- Higher numbers of women in local government would generally contribute stronger attention to women’s issues, particularly issues of public safety and violence against women
- Women are also more sensitive to shifts in the economy and spending ability of families and therefore rate payers
- Women bring a different problem solving approaches which can increase councils creativity in resolving outstanding issues

- Women are more likely to share new skills with other colleagues increasing overall organisational capacity
- Women in decision-making positions are seen as role models and can encourage greater engagement by other women
- Failure to involve women in local development program design and delivery may lead to ineffective policy and the discrimination against women in the community.
- Women’s presence in leadership positions represents one indicator for Goal 3 of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – “to promote gender equality and empower women”.



A critical mass of women participating in this way is guaranteed to improve the overall appropriateness, responsiveness and efficiency of local government service delivery – potentially resulting in a significant positive difference in net operating profit of the council!

During the most recent Women in Local Government Networking Event, women were asked to identify barriers to advancing women in leadership and management roles in local government.

Barriers

Despite significant research regarding the barriers to women’s participation in governance and leadership in Fiji, dialogue on the issue has been concentrated at the national rather than local level. Research undertaken by the SWPMG project has highlighted that whilst local government provides a logical entry point for women interested in a political career, or to participate in planning and implementing policies and activities that directly affect their families and communities, it is also here that many people still hold strong cultural beliefs that women ‘are not up to the challenge’.

During focus group discussions in December 2009, it became clear that women working in local government in Fiji face significant cultural and structural barriers to stepping forward, becoming leaders and driving change.

They are often subject to demeaning comments by co-workers, and sexual stereotypes that limit their capacity to undertake their work and the type of roles they can be involved in:

“We still have to carry toilet paper across the office, sometimes in front of other staff and clients, because management decided too much was being spent on toilet paper”

“We are not allowed to drive the council vehicle because the men in the office think we are bad drivers and will have an accident”

There is a significant lack of basic facilities and services that cater to the different but equally important needs of women workers in local councils:

“We don’t have separate changing rooms or toilet facilities at the council depot which means we are always under pressure to act like ‘one of the boys’”

Training activities often exclude women and women have limited opportunities to be heard:

“In the fifteen years I have been in Council, I have not once had the opportunity to attend training until now”

“In some cases women are more clued up but men are the ones who speak”

Women working in local government feel that they have greater pressure from colleagues and management to prove their skills, knowledge and ability to do their job than their male colleagues.

“I have always been shy to step forward and accept opportunities to act in decision-making roles when offered to me. I feel I would be judged”

Training opportunities that arise are often turned down due to a lack of management support in redistributing or managing women’s work load during training periods and the pressure women face to excel in their role.

“As a front-desk customer service officer, I feel I will get behind if I take time off to attend training”

In Fiji, women are largely responsible for care giving and domestic duties such as cooking and managing their family. This burden is often not redistributed when women have paid work, creating an extra burden on women who may have difficulty renegotiating these roles. Local council tasks regularly conflict with women’s home based responsibilities, which can create conflict within their family and in some cases lead to violence.

“We regularly had to stay back at work sometimes until 9pm to clean up after council functions (when councillors were in place). This was a real stress on my family life and children”

Some of the barriers identified to advancing women’s participation in leadership, in particular management roles include the following:

Socialisation & Stereotyping

- Women are considered soft, emotional and lack independence which is unsuited to executive management and leadership roles
- Women feel they have to balance and reconcile their expectations of ‘modern’ leadership styles with traditional hierarchical notions of decision-making
- Some job descriptions are still biased against women such as the position of the ‘market master’



- Other positions in council are stereotyped such as field workers which maintain the male dominant ‘face’ of local government. Generally, women feel that increasing the number of women in field work positions would encourage more women to raise concerns about council services and participate in council activities.

Balancing work, family & life

- Women have to balance career and family responsibilities, thus limiting their opportunities for career advancement
- There are very few support mechanisms such as child care facilities and flexible working hours



Self-confidence

- Women have a tendency to follow traditional career paths from assistant through to manager and lack self-confidence to ask for promotions
- Women are less likely to apply for a role unless they believe they have most of the skill-set required
- Women feel ill-equipped to engage and fear the response of colleagues resulting in a tendency to “self censor” themselves
- Women feel undervalued in the workplace

Skills recognition

- Interview panels typically don’t have women on them
- In a job interview, younger women are more likely to be asked about their family circumstances or plans to have children suggesting this might be a distraction to a demanding job
- Women are rarely given the opportunity to act in decision-making roles
- Women in management feel they are under more scrutiny than their male colleagues
- Women have less exposure to training and capacity building
- Very few capacity building initiatives have been designed especially for women

Women can sometimes be their own worst enemies

- Women in leadership positions are not always supportive of each other
- Women still feel the need to compete amongst each other for positions rather than with male colleagues due of the perceived and often real lack of opportunity
- Women do not always push for other women to be in the forefront
- Women have a mindset of being in a subordinate role and older women continue to reinforce this notion

Across the sector there is a strong perception that the success or failure of a woman is viewed as not just having an impact on the individual but on all women. Overall women feel they need to do better than their male colleagues, exceed performance targets and over-perform – so why not promote them!

Survey Findings

In October 2009, municipal councils in Fiji were invited to participate in a national survey as part of the Equality in Local Government Study. To date, the Project has received over 130 responses from both men and women management staff and former elected Councillors. Some of the key findings include:

- The majority of councils do not have a stated gender equality goal
- There are no specific gender policies at the local government level
- Only 1 out of 12 councils has a sexual harassment policy
- Less than 10% of men & women in local government are aware of the regional and national gender plans and policies
- Over 70% of men & women in local government have never participated in gender training

A full report of the survey findings will be available in May.

To ensure the SWPMG Project and its initiatives are relevant to women in the sector, a series of Women in Local Government Networking events were also held during 2009 and early 2010. In an over-whelming show of commitment, it was agreed that a national Women in Local Government (WiLG) Network be established to promote the SWPMG Project, the Year of Women in Local Government 2010, and change in local governments.

WiLG Network

The WiLG Network consists of local government employees, former councillors and other women and men interested in supporting women's participating in local government. The primary purpose of the network will be to:

- Raise awareness of the achievements of WiLG nationally
- Identify and promote strategies to remove barriers to the advancement of women in senior management positions
- Provide networking and information sharing opportunities nationally and internationally
- Provide opportunities for leadership and other technical skills training specifically for women in local government
- Provide professional development and training as well as personal development opportunities for women at all levels
- Share and promote best council practices in diversity management, flexible working practices, family friendly workplaces, professional development and succession planning etc
- Share and promote best council practices to engender service delivery.

Consistent support on the part of both male and female leaders and senior local government management staff will be critical to the success of the WiLG Network. A starting point will be the establishment of a WiLG Network executive committee and development of a statement or declaration on women in local government to be endorsed by all councils. It is then necessary for councils to take action to bring about essential changes to their workplace culture and governance that will promote the increased participation of women and engender council services.



Key Issues

Five key issues to advancing women into senior management and leadership roles have been identified. These include:

- Establishing the current status of women in local government management and leadership
- Identifying and removing barriers to the advancement of women into senior management and leadership positions
- Improving the image of local government as an employer of choice for women
- Preparing women in local government to lead
- Identifying effective evaluation methods for measuring meaningful progress and change

A key strategy platform of the SWPMG Project is the promotion and participation in the Year of Women in Local Government 2010 being facilitated by the Australian Local Government Managers Association (LGMA) to provide opportunities for women in local government to gain exposure to best practices in the sector. This will also promote attitudinal change about the value and relevance of women's experience and skills in the local government sector. Changing women and men's perceptions around styles of leadership will be essential to create enabling environments for increased levels of women's involvement in local government.

Training Needs

Women identified a number of training needs to be address by the SWPMG Project through WiLG Network activities. In particular, they are keen to tackle the issue of how to overcome the 'culture of silence' and debate issues that matter. These training needs are listed below:

- Basic leadership skills
- Financial management
- Understanding gender
- Writing meeting minutes
- Writing project proposals, reports & speeches
- Presentation & debating skills
- Computer & internet skills
- Customer service skills
- Human rights & industrial relations
- Sexual Harassment
- Team building

Women also identified the need to work with men to change attitudes towards increasing women's participation in local government. Overall, men interviewed as part of the Equality in Local Government Study in Fiji (former councillors and senior management staff) seemed open to women participating in local government, however lack the knowledge and skills to identify and realise strategies to help overcome barriers to women's participation and as well as engender council programs and services. The question now is – what is needed to bring them on board, and for them to progress, from merely encouraging women, to more active and visible support for women and gender equality in local government?

Partners

The following organisations make up the key national and regional partners who support for the SWPMG Project and the promotion of women in local government:

- United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Pacific
- United National Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) Pacific
- Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS)
- FemLINKPacific: Media Initiatives for Women (FemLINKPacific)
- The Foundation for Development Cooperation (FDC) Pacific
- Local Government Managers Association (LGMA) Australia
- Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA)
- Fiji Department of Local Government (DLG)
- Fiji Department of Women (DoW)
- Fiji Local Government Association (FLGA)

The SWPMG project will continue to engage with these and other stakeholders to promote activities that to celebrate the contribution of women in local government during 2010 and beyond.

Conclusion

Despite growing commitments to gender equality across the Pacific region, dialogue continues to be concentrated at the national rather than local level. The lack of recognition to the role of local government in progressing women's representation and participation in gender policies and plans is of grave concern given the opportunities it presents as the level of government closest to the community and therefore potentially most accessible to women.

There needs to be a concerted effort to raise the issue nationally and regionally through sustained action and advocacy. Only with greater commitment and cooperation by agencies at all levels, including local government, will the broader goal to improve the quality of life for women be achieved.

For more details contact:

Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF)
Pacific Project Office
Level 2, 8 Mitchell Street
Suva, FIJI
T: (679) 3300257
F: (679) 3302729
E: megan@clgfpacific.org.fj



