Status of Women in Urban Squatter Settlements in Fiji: A Case Study of the Living Conditions and Family and Community Participation in Jittu Estate, Suva

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Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Pacific Plan, Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Fijian government development plans have goals to address women's issues and to involve women in all sectors of the economy. This research finds that lack of gender specific policies have resulted to discrimination and vulnerability for women in the society. In at least one settlement – Jittu Estate - women's living conditions, family and community participation have deteriorated.

Introduction

The status of women in Fiji's society may be gauged by their living conditions and community involvement within the context of their respective local cultures. It is worth noting that a global economy demands that individual states live up to certain international standards such as having a knowledgeable society status. This is the driving force that is pushing for the recognition of individual human rights – women's rights inclusive - over customary and culture based rights. The latter happen to be, in many cases, gender biased. At the national level, therefore, it is necessary that Fiji's developments are continually assessed to ensure that good governance prevails – that is, policies which are enforced are compliant with the United Nations' (UN) declarations and ethos.

Women made up 49.8% of Fiji's population in 2005. In 2006, women represented 40% of the labour force of which 68% fell in the 'working poor' category (Khan & Barr cited in Newland, 2006). Evidently, women have been unequally distributed in the work force even though they make up almost half of Fiji's population. Researches have found that women are discriminated against in culture, the family and in the community (Bernklau et al., 2006). The reality is that society has made certain groups of people into second class citizens unworthy for certain privileges; often victimized because they divert from the norm in their preferences or are being born different. Women are in no way a minority but an 'equally likely outcome' of a gender. As such, women must be treated as partners to men in development positioned in society and in the community due to merits. This modern philosophical stance ensures that optimum results are achieved by reversing the effects of the polarization created by gender-biased policies and decisions made.

Fiji's efforts towards the fulfilment of the requirements of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been crippled by the political crises of 1987, 2000 and 2006, despite the implementation of mainstreaming agendas over women's programs. Such developments in the political arena only serve to enforce the enduring thoughts and practices within Fiji's patriarchal societies hence, undermining the esteemed goals of the modern world. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in its 2006 report highlighted an increase of Fiji's Human Poverty Index (HPI) from 8.5 in 1999 to 21.4 in 2004. Using this as a guide, it could be generalized, therefore, that intensive efforts must be directed towards elevating the living conditions of each member of civil society, especially the most vulnerable, and hence bridging the gap between the rich and the poor which happens to characterize most democracies of the world.

While communal existence augurs well for any future plans by the government to implement policies that would hope to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor, there is the danger of the development of a kind of dependence that could prove destructive if the sharing practice is left unchecked. It must be realized that Fiji, though a comparatively small nation, is still a part of a knowledge based global economy and as such, the selective process which favours the educated and civilized is inevitable and will continue to discriminate. The government must ensure, therefore, that women are trained and given equal opportunities, as their male counterparts,

to serve their nation and its people.

A greater misconception of the widening gap between the ideal and the actual status of women in society is unfortunately caused by the state's failure to report fairly on whether these real needs have been met by its only arm that seems to be doing the work – Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) (UNESCO, 2006, UN, 2002 and FWRM et al., 2002). Apparently, efforts by Fiji's women have been curtailed by the alleged discrimination and inequality which prevails in state legislation (Mohanty, 2006, Newland, 2006 and FWRM et al., 2002). If empowerment comes by way of education, then the education sector must be reorganized to address gender-specific issues through appropriate curriculum development and training for males and females (NZAID, 2005 and FWRM et al., 2002). This call for the lifting of the bias in the provision of non-formal education, also tends to favour males over females (FWRM et al., 2002). These services, whether run by government or CSOs, must not limit women to roles revolving around the domestic arena (UNDP, 1997) but rather help them to explore thought processes that are more lateral, challenging and technical such as marketing and negotiation skills. Empowering women equates to empowering families and hence, the nation.

In recognition of the uniqueness of women and their needs, the UN is equipping policy makers at the state level with the necessary knowledge and skills to usher in equality and eliminate feminization of poverty. The effectual execution of these policies by government agencies and CSOs (Civil Society Organisations) at the grassroots level seems to be where the heart of society's problems lie. Higher rates of domestic violence, rape and sexual harassments reported by women (FWCC, 2007) indicate a general weakening of society's social structures to uphold justice due to weak gender-based policies which indirectly promotes the demonstration of power of the strong over the weak. Empowering vulnerable women in squatter settlements through education is, therefore, necessary to prepare them for the high demands of today's modern world and cause them to rise from the lowly positions they had been subjected to by those who oppress them – due to some kind of an uneducated and undemocratic assumption that is based on a hunger for power and control.

A squatter community like Jittu Estate is populated mainly by migrants from various rural settings in search of a different kind of life in the city. Its residents are not completely ignorant and unassuming, for they know full well the implications of settling in a squatter settlement. The government is faced with a major problem that would be best solved through a rigorous educational reform which is not gender-blind but addresses gender specific issues with a focus on minimizing gender inequality in society. Such is schooling; whether formal and/or informal, that can effectively reach the people of Fiji, especially our women, and help them to be equipped for active participation in the family and the community, and in all aspects of national development.

This research aims to highlight ways in which government's decisions, in terms of policies implemented, have failed to meet the real needs of the women they are supposed to assist. Gender specific approaches is believed to be the way forward if the status of women in Jittu Estate, the largest squatter settlement in central Suva, is to be elevated weakening the iron grip of poverty on these women and their families. The effectiveness of such community development initiatives already undertaken by government and CSOs in their commitment to the Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs) will be analyzed in light of the views held by the participants to this survey. Improving the status of women in urban squatter settlements will, therefore, hope to eliminate gender disparity, especially in education, by the year 2015. Consequently, an educated women population will see many more of females actively engaged in developmental programs, even at the decision making level in the economic and political arenas – together as co-workers with their male counterparts. Recognizing women as men's equals in development is, therefore, foundational to a thriving economy of any modern day democracy. As a result, it is hoped that poverty of housing as reported by Storey (2006) will gradually cease from being a common feature in Fiji's urban centres.

Methods

The Jittu Estate community, the oldest and largest squatter settlement in Fiji (Lingam, 2005), is located in the inner part of central Suva on land which belongs to the Methodist Church of Fiji (MCF). It has a population of close to 6,000 divided amongst about 1,000 families/households (Mohanty, 2006; Ministry for Local Government cited in Wilson, 2006).

Fifteen women from Jittu Estate were selected at random to participate in focus group interviews for this survey. The ages of these women ranged from 20 to 56 years. Of these, six were i-

Taukei, six Indo-Fijians and the remaining three represented the other races. The 15 participants had lived in this community for periods ranging from less than a week to more than fifteen years.

Twelve of these women spoke English while the other three required the service of a translator to ensure that they participated and that their feedback during interview, were recorded accurately. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to interview the service providers. Field work was conducted in early 2007.

Women's Living Conditions

Inadequate housing and poor living conditions are two critical issues affecting the lives of women in squatter settlements. These settlers, whether male or female, lack legal ownership of land and are, therefore, powerless to prevent problems related to infrastructure. Because the land on which the families are staying was not developed for residential purpose initially, residents are now facing problems like poor sanitation and pollution which lead to health problems.

Security issue is another major concern for female residents of squatter settlements. Everyday these women live their lives fearing for their own safety and those of their childrens'. Apart from lack of income, land ownership problems, health issues and deteriorating living conditions, these women are also vulnerable to social problems like abuse and harassment by their husbands or outsiders because of the nature of the place and the people who dwell therein. These impoverishing conditions and related problems affect these women physically as well as psychologically, and may lead one to a life of crime.

Women's Participation in the Family

Women, as natural nurturers, are seen as experts in child-rearing and are often labelled by society as homemakers. Primarily, women are responsible for making a house a home. Husbands and children depend on them to complete their home experience – resulting in the neglect of their womanly needs. Though honourable, this cultural attitude restricts women to doing the house work and supporting family members at the expense of their own personal development.

Women see the family as an intimate social institution which is based on ethical principles of obligations and responsibilities. As such, participants to this survey do not seem to critically analyse their own families, staying true to the expectations of their traditional roles. However, the women commented on how the patrilineal family structures allowed males to control their wives and children, limiting their freedom to participate in community-based activities or visit their relatives and friends.

To make sense of their desperate situations, these women emphasized that faith provided a means of coping with the difficulties they face on a daily basis. This inclination makes them more spiritual and committed to religion then their male counterparts. For most families, therefore, mothers are seen as the custodians of good morals and sound values. The women, whether they were working or not, agreed that they would appreciate more male involvement in the division of labour since the workload is huge and never-ending. Only one of the fifteen women interviewed enjoys her husband's support in the domestic arena. This is yet another indication of the prevailing notion that housework is for women exclusively.

Two women engaged in informal selling were concerned about the government's decision to ban such activities from government departments, like the Ministry of Women. This development highlights the need for government to support women entrepreneurs and especially those involved in micro-businesses by opening up for them opportunities to sell their services with dignity. Even then, permission to be enterprising must still be granted by their husbands or fathers in the case of spinsters.

Four of the fifteen – 27% – were working women. As decision makers, the four working women enjoy a little freedom because they decide how their wages are spent. This implies that the unemployed women have got no choice but to live by what the men of their homes provide. They are still subjected to conditions; natural or otherwise social, that they have little or no control over. This reality necessitates that women are strengthened from within through non-formal education which builds on their sense of self worth and consequently drives them towards the development of their natural talents or newly acquired skills. Such empowerment will equip women to challenge any status quo or extreme political views which, more often then not, tend to either collapse the family unit or throw vulnerable women deeper into the abyss of suffering in silence fearing being ostracized by the community.

A major set-back for women in Jittu Estate is the psychological challenge associated with living in poverty-stricken and crime-ridden neighbourhoods. Domestic violence, for example, is an experience faced by many women in patriarchal societies. Some of the participants' reluctance to discuss the issue openly is indicative of their hopes and aspirations for a decent and fulfilling life for themselves and their loved ones. A research by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) in 1999 pointed out that women's psychological trauma makes them vulnerable to abuse and domination by men and as such, women living in squatter settlements may fall victims to the whims of certain men in the community who understand that desperate women are easy prey to serve their perversion. Here lies an assumption that deteriorating and extremely life endangering living conditions with a lack of assistance to improve the welfare of women and their families may pressure some women into prostitution (ADB, 2006 and UNDP, 1997).

The family, being an important unit of any community, needs to be surrounded by social support structures. Living in an unfamiliar neighbourhood, where residents are forced to adapt to a communal living lifestyle without any or little traditional ties, can be tormenting for women. Men, given their freedom, tend to develop social groups easily which leaves women at an awkward position simply because they are home-bound. A government which seriously considers the plight of women as homemakers will prioritise women's issues for national interest knowing that they are a strong pillar of society because they have been equipped by nature to mother and nurture any nation into self-determination.

Women, by nature, therefore, are defined by their housing and home environment. A number of participants admitted that 'the smallness of our houses, due to overcrowding, affects our well-being'.

Because a woman lacking a strong social support system struggles with issues from within the four walls of her house, space becomes an important factor which determines whether she rises or sinks to family and societal pressures. Participating in well funded and coordinated personal and community development programs gives disenfranchised women a breathing space which relieves them of their suffering and renews their vigour to effectively manage their situations and sustain their families.

Women's Participation in the Community

A majority of the women participants in this survey did not complete secondary school education while three of the fifteen were unable to even complete primary school education. However, all participants saw education as the top priority in a person's upbringing because it thoroughly prepares one to take on leadership roles. The women clearly understood that excellent communication and problem solving skills, two highly valued ideal in a western education system, help build on a woman's self-confidence to work outside feminine domains. A formal education qualification is thus seen as the stepping stone to employment and the securing of a better future.

The women interviewed, though struggling in difficult conditions, agreed that social change is still possible through informal education. As members of a Mothers' Club, these women were able to put certain skills they learned in their fortnightly meetings like time management, crocheting and baking, into good use in their own homes. Their personal savings in their club's bank account is another incentive for joining the Mothers' Club though a couple of them had reservations about sharing personal problems with other members for fear of these concerns becoming public knowledge and causing a rift amongst members and their families.

Social networking at Jittu Estate is a positive sign that change is not only possible but desired. The six unemployed women, or full time homemakers, are actively interacting with other women in the community and together they have become sources of strength and encouragement to one another. Whether it is in the spaces between their homes or in public places like church and/or temple, these encounters are helping the women to cope with loneliness and, therefore, establishing an atmosphere that they are comfortable in and which makes them feel like they belong. Such closeness creates a fallback position for indigenous women especially.

Services Provided to Women

Within Jittu Estate, the Methodist Church and the Mandir are instrumental in unifying and mobilizing the women of the community. Spiritual leaders play an integral part in advocacy at the settlement for they represent the purity of these religious organizations and have, over time, earned the trust of the residents. The commu-

nity's kindergarten, the Mobile Playground (MP), established by Save the Children Fiji (SCF) in association with the Methodist Church, has been a converging point especially for women whose children attended preschool. While waiting for their preschoolers, the mothers are often engaged in the learning of life-coping skills at the church irrespective of whether they were members of the church or not. *Mandir* members, on the other hand, had also been assisting many in need, Hindus and non-Hindus alike, to find a means of survival. The interesting fact is that no matter how unfamiliar we are with an environment, as social beings we would still develop some kind of social networking to fallback on for support using customary practices and structures that have been in place for some time – when celebrating religious ceremonies like *Ram Naumi* or *Deepawali*, for instance, in the temple. Most of the women were excited while discussing this point for it gives them the opportunity to socialize with other women of the community and at the same time get '*Prasad*' (savouries or food).

Outside of Jittu Estate, the other essential services which were frequently accessed by these women included the Colonial War Memorial Hospital, Social Welfare Department, the Police Station and the Health Centres. Awareness of the existence of these generally interlinking organizations and the kinds of services they offer came mostly by way of friends and neighbours. A lot rests on what the government, through NGOs, is willing to lay down to improve the living conditions and family and community participations of women in squatter settlements. The Fiji's Women's Plan of Action (WPA) in 1997, in response to the need to educate women on their rights to all available help and resources, reviewed their policies and in the Women's Leaders Summit, proposed five strategies which were to be implemented in order to include women in the development process (Ministry of Women and Culture, 1998).

Participants, regardless of ethnicity, religion and age, used public services the most. Enduring the long waits and unfriendly staff could be challenging but for these women, there were no other alternatives. Religious organizations such as the Salvation Army, the Fiji Muslim League, Raiwaqa Methodist Church and the Gospel Church provided some assistance for the community – mainly for their respective members. As for the quality of the services these women have ever accessed, they agreed that banking services were the only ones they were satisfied with. Women of Jittu Estate know what they want and just as they reported, they are not at all informed

about their entitlements and rights to the access of these essential services.

According to the women, the greatest obstacle faced by someone hoping to access assistance from government agencies and NGOs is the attitude of the people who work there. The abuse they face in the hands of these public servants can be so overwhelming that the women would, for convenience sake, choose to remain silent about these encounters in case their requests and/or applications get rejected. The culture of silence which characterizes hierarchical and patriarchal societies like we have in Fiji, therefore, strongly discriminates against these vulnerable uneducated women living in dire conditions giving more power and influence to the elite minority to abuse their privileges over their fellow citizens. In light of these revelations, it could be suggested that staff at public and social services need continuous professional development to be totally equipped for managing their clients. Leaders of these organizations need to be meticulous and precise when organizing their staff to ensure that everyone behaves appropriately towards the public and provides the services that will affect the changes policy makers and sponsors hope to see implemented in the community and the nation as a whole. Such a move calls for greater accountability from those who have been entrusted with national development, for the greater good, by the government and the international communities.

Description of Services

In association with the Pacific Plan and CEDAW, the Fijian government implemented the Strategic Development Plan goal to address women's issues and to involve women in all sectors of the economy. The Ministry of Women, Social Welfare and Housing (MWSWH), the umbrella body for four ministerial departments – the Department of Women, Department of Social Welfare, Department of Housing and Squatter Settlement and the Poverty Alleviation Unit - is believed to be the primary advisor to government on public policies that affect women and more precisely, women in squatter settlements. However, during the interview MWSMH stated that they have to rely on the state to make decisions to operate and implement strategies for women. It appears then that the MWSWH does not have the freedom to change or amend policies in relation to women's needs.

In addition to this, two of the four departments - the Department of Women and Department of Social Welfare - appear to have a number of programs that deal with a few of the gender-specific development goals. With assistance from donor agencies, these departments oversee regulations, both as policymakers and as service providers to women. The Department for Social Welfare, for example, highlighted that there is one specific program for women that focuses mainly on micro-finance. This service includes preparing proposals on behalf of women to apply for funds to start their own businesses and, giving guidance to women on ways to sustain their finances and businesses. In this process, the ministry follows up the program and closely monitors the progress of each case by visiting participants in their homes and investigating their progress and experiences.

The other two departments - the Department of Housing and Squatter Settlement and the Poverty Alleviation Unit - emphasized that they do not target women specifically but the poor in general by providing land and basic infrastructure for relocated squatters in joint ventures with the Housing Authority and the Housing Assistance and Relief Trust (HART). Their assistance includes income generating projects, and welfare benefits such as money for basic food items, medical support and school fees and stationery costs for their children. It is worth noting that most of the recipients of the assistance from the Poverty Alleviation Fund are women who have already qualified, because of the fact that they live in extreme destitution (ADB, 2006 and UNDP, 1997). Able-bodied people, however, are disadvantaged for they are expected to look after themselves and work their way out of poverty (UNDP, 1997).

Even though beneficiaries of assistance from MWSWH normally have easier access to several other government and CSOs' services, the benefits have often been insufficient necessitating that clients find other means to earn a living. CSOs, whether they operate in partnership with government or not, emphasized that accessibility to government funding (contracts and/or grants) could become so low that they are compelled to rely on self-organizational means to function effectively. The reality is that civil society may only achieve gender equality, and hence eradicate disparity, if governments are truly committed to the cause ensuring that gender-specific policies are implemented in all sectors of life in order to meet the differing needs of men and women of our modern world. Until then, Fiji will always have to play catch up.

Years after these well meaning deliberations, it cannot be said for sure whether the policies had been effectively implemented or not because women still lack necessary information made accessible to them. 75% of the women emphasized that efforts by NGOs and religious organizations had not been entirely well coordinated, and much of the advocacy work had depended mainly on the media with minimal interactions between participants and social workers.

Problems Encountered in the Process of Service Delivery

Having identified some gaps between the services intended and the services rendered, service providers (the state, NGOs and religious organizations) were able to isolate some hindrances to the process of service delivery that needed to be removed for Fiji to attain the civilized world's ideals on the protection of women's rights. Most of the problems highlighted, thus, reflect Fiji's degree of commitment to these standards as defined by the UN and which, in most cases, reject customary practices that tend to favour men over women issues. The following summarize some of these enduring problems:

- Lack of funds to provide efficient and reliable services.
- Competition amongst service providers for funds to operate.
- Lack of cooperation amongst NGOs limiting their effectiveness.
- Clients' lack of understanding due to limited literacy.
- Donors' demands put pressure on service providers to meet deadlines.
- High degree of fear of failure in service providers and participants.
- Need for the right people to facilitate these services.
- Lack of support and motivation from the community.

The nature of these interrelated problems is threefold. The state in dispensing funds to the various government departments and CSOs, must be thoroughly informed about the intensity of the services these service providers are expected to give to the community they serve. Sources of information that government bases its decision making on will, therefore, need verification.

Service providers need people who understand and appreciate their uniqueness and interconnectedness. As a community of social

workers, each member must be educated about how the works of their various departments and/or organizations overlap. This realization ensures that their efforts and resources are not wasted because repetition is avoided. This knowledge will also foster cooperation and dampen competition. Consequently, the disadvantaged groups benefit more.

The public in general needs to be aware of these developments as citizens of a sovereign state bound by international laws. Recipients of assistance from these government departments, NGOs and religious organizations need to understand the concept of social work in the context of national development. Most importantly, the public needs to be informed of how their individual rights to access these services are protected.

Commentary

The poor implementation of gender-specific policies by government and CSOs in their attempts to improve the living standards and community participations of women in squatter settlements is linked, for the most part, to the practically non-existent relationship between these women and the service providers. Whether policy makers truly understand their duty as leaders to their people, especially the women of Fiji or, they are just blinded by their self-seeking political will, the fact remains that these vulnerable women's needs have not been fully addressed and that there seems to be an apparent lack of accountability for the failure observed in service delivery. Any hindrance to the effective implementation of policies which are designed to promote gender-equality, therefore, raises questions about society's full commitment and cooperation towards the attainment of these universal ideals.

The findings of this paper reveal that most of the government and CSOs' services are for the general public and are not specifically aimed at helping disadvantaged women of squatter settlements. The reality is that there are a relatively small number of reported cases of women believed to be living in these desperate conditions and this lack of information ultimately leads to shortfalls in service delivery. Government must, therefore, endeavour to sponsor independent researches, at regular intervals, and have their findings documented accurately and fairly for policy makers to consult with while strategizing for national development. This is the only sure way of identifying why certain strategies do not work and as a re-

sult, alternate solutions could be tried out to ensure that the policies implemented truly benefit the population targeted.

Some of the service providers which are impacting women in Fiji today are the Department of Women, Department of Social Welfare, Save the Children Fiji, Fiji Women's Rights Movement and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre – in addition to the religious organizations which normally provide assistance for their women members. The fact that the programmes of these departments were poorly coordinated contributes to the failure to truly address women's issues. This status can be traced back to society's negative attitudes and beliefs about the status of women in our communities. Having misconceptions about women causes may be the first hindrance therefore, to be eliminated from the hearts and minds of everyone in social work before one can expect service delivery to improve.

Regardless of all the good intentions and initiatives shown by government and CSOs in their efforts to curb the feminization of poverty, it can be assumed that the point of contact between service providers and recipients of assistance must be carefully and critically analyzed. Communication skills of social workers and the literacy level of community members are two probable causes of the failure of these exercises. To effectively meet the needs of women, they must be allowed to contribute to the planning processes and the developments of these programs. This survey has found that the primary need of these women is to understand the learning process – a knowledge without which sustaining these non-formal educational programs will be virtually impossible.

Fiji's adoption of the Westminster system of governance has proven to work contrary to legislations aimed at establishing gender equality. The judiciary's attitudes towards, and interpretations of law have continued to succumb to pressures from governments affecting women adversely. Women have often found it inconvenient to report harassment and rape, for instance, for fear of being dispossessed by the community after they had been publicly humiliated by the media following investigations and trials. Such a mentality is one of the reasons why not many women would dare being singled out for it only makes them susceptible to more abuse. This explains in part the culture of silence prevalent amongst women of patriarchal societies.

Powerlessness is one factor which is known to cripple potentials in people; women in squatter settlements are the most affected

in this regard. For as long as women feel that they are being disadvantaged by the system, they will continue to live a quiet and supposedly normal life where they remain subjected to the dictates of their cultures. Modernization demands that women be educated of their rights to know and access all services provided by the state and CSOs for the sole purpose of improving their living conditions, and family and community participations. Boosting women's sense of self-worth and personal power in a knowledge-based economy through humanitarian efforts has been found, therefore, to positively influence their health and safety and ultimately, the infrastructure and the environment they live in.

Jittu Estate, being a densely populated squatter settlement in central Suva, places women and their families in a position where they are obligated to enter into a communal lifestyle which thrives on dependency relations with friends and neighbours in the community. The negative connotation attached to the term 'squatter', which is used to describe these settlers, creates a mindset that is shaping the behaviours of both residents and non-residents of the settlement. With the 'outside world' seen as unfriendly and predatory, residents are looking within for their own security and identity hence establishing a system of borrowing (*kerekere*) which is proving to be an obstacle itself in women's personal struggles to pursue their individual goals and aspirations.

Nonetheless, women are fighters and as nature has it, they are survivors. Their natural ability to rise in the face of challenges makes them society's effective instruments of change. Whether constricted by space, culture or politics, women have continuously proven that they care for humanity by being genuinely supportive of community development. Women of squatter settlements like Jittu Estate are no exceptions as they have been involved in almost every program run by government agencies and CSOs that promises to improve the residents' living conditions. The success of these service providers to adequately meet the needs of the women, therefore, depends on society's capability to accept that traditional assumptions are subject to change before gender equality issues are pursued with sincerity and fairness.

Women, like men, have their strengths and weaknesses. In reality men and women complement each other very well as one's strength makes up for the other's lack. The problem lies in the belief systems which form the basis of our rich cultural heritage. Women have a hope in education in this day and age as society becomes

more knowledge based. The international community understands this but progress in that direction had been slow for Fiji due to the political uncertainties created by the coups. Fiji's patriarchal society must accept that securing prominence through knowledge acquisition far surpasses the use of arms and military prowess, thus preparing the way for a sure return to economic and political stability. Policies implemented to serve the needs of Fiji's women, when administered well, will therefore establish Fiji as a nation of equal opportunities drawing potential women into nation building at the decision making level.

Recommendations

There is no doubt that informal settlements will continue to expand in Fiji (MacKinnon et al., 2007; Bryant, 1993). Residents are bound to see the deteriorating effects of this expansion on their living conditions and as well as their family and community participations, if government and civil society fail to intervene in time. Kothari emphasises that every woman has the right to gain and sustain a secure home and community in which to live in peace and dignity (2004:. 3). With this mindset, it can be argued then that the contributions made by the participants to this survey warrant careful considerations by donors and service providers which are committed to women's causes. The following recommendations have been drawn from participants' responses, therefore, and highlighted to help improve service delivery.

- *Increase funding:* the government should ensure that ongoing support (financial) is provided for service providers working with women. This will boost CSOs' enthusiasm in developing community coherence promoting gender-equality in non-formal education and vocational training opportunities. Women's interests could, therefore, be explored to encourage greater participation from them in the informal sector.
- *Low-cost housing:* the government should continue to provide affordable homes for low income earners around the main urban centres. This will relieve squatter settlements of their current problem of overcrowding when some of their residents take up the low-cost housing offer. This concept will work well if the main government departments and public services are decentralized by establishing new towns

and cities around Suva to distract potential urban dwellers from the capital.

- *More research:* up-to-date research in demographic patterns and social trends characteristic of squatter communities is necessary in order to fully understand the dynamics of informal settlements' growth. Participants to this survey agree that policy makers, donors and service providers must regularly engage with squatter women to experience first-hand their situational needs before policies are formulated.
- *Adopt participatory approach:* providers of essential services - government and CSOs - must adopt a participatory approach when designing and implementing programs. The use of participatory research tools will help service providers and women to interact more openly with each other discovering specific need areas to be addressed and improved. This approach will certainly facilitate participants' active involvement in the programs and thus maximize results.
- *Program development:* the effectiveness of the programs depend on whether the learning acquired is applicable to real life or not. Programs must be developed, therefore, to suit the targeted population's education level accounting for their basic literacy and numeracy skills, amongst other things. This situation demands that the medium of communication employed must be selected and utilized with caution to minimize wastages that come as a direct result of poor planning.
- *Service provision awareness and trust:* for the programs to be successful, it is important that progress is monitored. Part of this monitoring process deals with the effective use of competency-based assessment tools to evaluate participants' skills and aptitude during the course of the program (either as instructors or learners). This continuous interactive process helps to maintain good working relations and trust between participants hence, empowering women and informing service providers.
- *Community projects:* engaging women and stakeholders (such as land owners) in the planning, monitoring, maintenance and management of infrastructure helps to encourage community involvement and support. Projects, once accomplished, remain as evidence of the effectiveness of the

programs implemented. Consequently, the community will develop a sense of ownership (with government) and one of being responsible for the protection and care of their public facilities and infrastructures.

- *Positive messages:* a change in the name 'squatter' to a more pleasant sounding terminology, and/or may be its implications and associations, will help instil some positive feelings in its residents about the place that they live in. The media will be the most effective tool to be used to influence society's ill-informed perceptions about informal settlements. Squatter settlements are indeed reflective of Fiji's multi-cultural identity and are, therefore, perfect for a campaign on the government's current stand on the unification of the people of this nation.
- *Network and space:* the power of networks to fuel and effect changes in society and in our various communities could never be underestimated. What seems to be lacking at Jittu Estate is the availability of adequate meeting space for its women to congregate in and share with one another. Such facilities and services are necessary to enable the enhancement of these women's qualities of beauty, peace and friendship hence, discovering and expanding their hidden talents. Service providers must, therefore, seek to facilitate the development and sustainability of such social and community networks.

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