



# Local Government: Servicing Whom?

For the most part, the approach to gender at the local level in the Pacific has been about numbers: getting women into decision-making positions. There has been little consideration of how such a presence can be leveraged to further the more important long term goals of transforming gender relations in communities and targeting basic service delivery to women and men's needs, and therefore improving their quality of life.

Local governments in Fiji are not well known for their efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of their services. Aside from more apparent reasons of poor capacity and finance, the situation raises two important questions: Who is benefiting from council services? Are services being designed for those who access them?

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 decision making processes (as leaders, managers and citizens) which means that services have been and are currently largely designed and managed by men, and are likely to reflect their priorities and perspectives. Recent changes to local government structures have further reduced women's voice and government accountability to women. It is an important time to be considering what can be done to support the development of local government structures and service delivery approaches that meet the different needs of both women and men.

Inadequate street lights, poorly maintained public toilets, roads and footpaths, increasing informal settlements, localised crime, lack of economic opportunities, and access to finance: these and many more issues are the concerns of women and men in urban communities in Fiji as well as challenges confronting local governments in the Pacific.

## Introduction

Government service delivery is not gender-neutral: services have different impacts on women and men. Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, the Fiji Government is obligated to ensure the provision, quality and quantity of the services necessary for their citizens to achieve their human rights. As a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, Fiji is also responsible for ensuring women have equal access to services, a voice in decision making on service design and implementation, and that services are designed to meet women's needs and interests alongside men's.

Local government service delivery in Fiji has a history of being gender-blind.<sup>1</sup> The statistics show that decision-making roles in local government have been largely held by men; 85% of councillors and 90% of senior managers in 2008 were men. In addition, none of Fiji's 12 municipal councils have gender equality policies or collect gender disaggregated data, over 70% of council staff have never received gender training, and less than 30% are aware of Fiji's national, regional and international obligations towards achieving gender equality.

Local governments continue to use consultation processes sporadically, and have often perceived these processes as opportunities to advise the public about issues, rather than gain perspectives from the participants. When consultations are held, women are often not invited, or due to cultural norms, do not actively participate in the discussion. The lack of women's voices in these instances together with the lack of data and information about women's needs means that council services designed to support women are often based on men's perspectives of women's context and concerns, and may not actually serve women's needs.

Women's lack of voice in council service provision can result in inappropriate or poorly designed services, ongoing difficulties for women in accessing services and inefficient use of council's scarce resources.

## SWPMG Project

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

'The systematic integration of women augments the democratic basis, the efficiency and the quality of the activities of local government' (IULA Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government)

<sup>1</sup> Gender-blind policies or approach recognise no difference between the sexes – that all human beings are the same and there is no difference between men and women

## Local Government Service Delivery

One of the greatest strengths of local government is its close position to the community it serves. Local government is more accessible to community members and is also directly responsible for the provision of services that have impact on the day to day lives of citizens. Its activities affect both men and women in ways that are fundamental to satisfying their basic needs and quality of life.

'Whilst women and men build, live, work and share cities and towns, they do not do these things in the same way. Due to differences in the living conditions, responsibilities and relations between women and men i.e. their gender differences, they experience urban life in very different ways.' (UN-Habitat Gender and Local Government Sourcebook)

Although men and women often share a common concern for issues such as roads, waste management, public safety, economic opportunities and health they also experience these differently because of their different social and economic roles and responsibilities. Women as a group have a more acute need for local government services. This is partly because they earn less and are less able to buy these services on the private market. It is also because the failure of local governments to deliver these services efficiently and effectively results in increased workloads for women in their roles as household managers, primary care givers and unpaid community development workers.

Although women are key players at the community level, they are on average poorer than men and are more dependent on basic services than men. Despite this, they continue to be excluded from critical decision making processes.

### Roles of Local Government in Fiji

Women participating in a community workshop facilitated by the CLGF Pacific Project in Sigatoka Fiji, identified the lack of information about local government and processes that enable women to access and share information, as serious barriers to participation. Therefore, an important starting point for women's increased engagement in local governance is in understanding what local government actually does.

Local councils in Fiji are mainly concerned with the basic services that affect people's daily lives such as:

- Local roads and transport infrastructure (footpaths, bus stations etc)
- Urban planning and design
- Public sanitation (public toilets, drainage)
- Solid waste collection and disposal
- Street lights, signage etc
- Urban environmental management (litter, commercial and industrial emissions control)
- Public health protection (commercial operators)
- Local economic development (business licenses)
- Culture, recreational and sports facilities (libraries, concerts, parks and open spaces)
- Cemeteries
- Emergency services (fire protection)

Whilst councils in Fiji are not directly responsible for water and electricity, education, public transport (which is privatized), housing, health care, police or legal services, they are important partners of the various agencies that deliver these services. Indeed, citizens do not access these services in isolation, and many services impact on other service delivery outcomes and are reliant on them. Local governments need to take a holistic view of service delivery in order to ensure that there is a positive overall impact on the quality of life of their citizens.

82% of participants in the SWPMG national survey on equality and local government said that women in local government have a responsibility to raise women's issues. 57% said that men also have a role to play in representing women's issues.

### Women in Local Government

Both men and women in local government have a responsibility to ensure that local government policy, program and budget outcomes represent the needs and priorities of diverse women and men in the communities they serve, in particular those who are the poorest.

Although they may not yet realise it, women in local government as leaders, managers and employees, can play an important role in influencing local government processes to become more gender aware. By speaking out and raising women's issues in internal discussions, they can promote the consideration of women's concerns in the design, management, financing, monitoring and evaluation of council policies and programs. Women's voice in these processes is important not only as a fundamental expression of women's human rights, but to ensure that services meet the different needs, concerns and barriers faced by women from different ethnic, socio-economic and religious backgrounds.

In 2006, women's right to become an elected representative of government or vote in government elections in Fiji was severely curtailed alongside men as a result of the coup d'état. This loss of their *political voice* at the national level flowed down to local level governance in 2009 with the expiry of councillors' terms and the postponement of elections until 2014. Despite the lack of councillors, local councils continue to deliver services to their communities, with leadership from 'Special Administrators' contracted by the interim government to undertake the role of the Mayor or governing strategic decision making head. At present only one of the seven special administrators is a woman. The lack of elected and diverse representation in the leadership of local government reduces avenues for women to raise concerns, be heard on issue of importance, and feel that decisions being made reflect the priorities of their communities.

At a management level, women are also significantly under-represented. Less than 25% of local government employees in Fiji are women and only 8% are in senior management positions. Without a critical mass, women's *decision making voice* is severely curtailed. In order for women to be able to effectively wield their potential influence, councils will need to address organisational cultural barriers that stereotype women and fail to recognise and value women's skills. Women will also need to build their confidence, find ways to support each

other and lobby for their increased representation at management level.<sup>2</sup>

The gendered segmentation of employment opportunities is distinct in local government, with women in the administrative, clerical, finance (accounting, rate administration) and health sections of councils and men predominating in the technical and manual areas such as urban planning, infrastructure and local economic development; 98% of fieldworkers and laborers are men and 100% of cleaners are women!

There are no targets in place for addressing the gender gaps in the staff composition of councils in Fiji. Job advertisements are gender neutral or bias towards men; such as the role of 'Market Master'. There are very few processes in place for encouraging women to enter more senior management positions such as talent spotting, fast tracking, coaching and mentoring.

Whilst positions in local government have historically been gender specific, and often exclude women, a number of councils are starting to provide unprecedented opportunities for women to take on male dominated roles.

Ba Town Council recently appointed two women to manage different areas of the marketplace, whereas previously such positions were stereotyped as male roles

Nadi Town Council recently appointed a woman to act in the position of CEO – 'I only acted for two weeks but the experience not only provided me with valuable skills but has empowered women in the whole office to take opportunities to step into decision-making roles'

In 2008, Suva City Council appointed the first ever female head gardener

Findings of the SWPMG national survey suggest that local government employees have a good understanding of the meaning of the term gender. However, when asked further about the implications for local government they are not able to elaborate. This suggests that even though they are aware of the concept, they do not have the capacity and skills to identify, recognise and address gender issues in their work and in the workplace.

A significant contributor to the lack of gender aware planning is the lack of up-to-date data and information about the communities that local governments are serving. When data is collected by local councils, it is not often sex-disaggregated (male/female) and then analysed to draw out gendered issues and impacts of policy and planning. Findings of the SWPMG national survey indicate that gender analysis is also not part of the design, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation frameworks of council programs and projects. Furthermore, participants felt they didn't have the skills to undertake such analysis even if it were a requirement or priority.

In order to measure the impact of council policies and programs on men and women, gender-sensitive indicators must be seen as a necessary part of the local council monitoring and evaluation systems. In light of the fact that some local councils in Fiji may not have even basic monitoring and evaluation

systems, it is imperative that these are developed to capture gender sensitive information. This type of system will only be meaningful if the council regularly captures and analyses this gender disaggregated data. The data gathered must go beyond the statistics of how many men and women are employed in local governance to data about and for the council's beneficiaries – the people that they serve.

## Women in Local Government (WiLG) Network

The WiLG Network consists of local government employees, former councillors and other men and women interested in supporting women's participation in local government. The primary purpose of the network is 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.

## Barriers to Women's Participation

In Fiji, the design and planning of local government programs and projects is still largely undertaken without external consultation. Consultation processes are rarely conducted prior to planning to determine the needs and priorities of men and women in the community and gain their perspectives and ideas.

In the event of hosting consultation processes, councils have not actively reached out to involve women; information about meetings does not always reach women and the time and place of public consultations and meetings are often inappropriate for women's needs. Some of the typical challenges women face in participating in council meetings include:

- Meetings are held in the early evening in which case women may not be able to attend because of their responsibilities for children, and preparing dinner for their families
- Meetings are held after dark which discourage women from attending for security reasons
- Meetings are held in places distant from home which discourage women from attending due to the availability and cost of public transport
- Meetings do not always provide for women and men who are not well educated and cannot read
- Meetings do not cater for the ethnic diversity of constituents and language can sometimes be a barrier to clear communication
- Meetings are typically conducted by male local government staff and attended by men which may discourage women

<sup>2</sup> Equality in Local Government, Research Project undertaken by SWPMG, 2010

from participating in discussions and limit opportunities to be asked to contribute

- Meetings often focus on infrastructure and not on issues or services important to women which reduces their women interest and motivation to attend

The reality of women's gender roles has direct consequences for their available time; women tend to be busy people. The challenge to promoting civic participation is that it requires constituents to invest their time.

Local governments can take active steps to promote women's participation in council activities and planning processes. Raising the value of women's voices in discussions with men community leaders and women in communities will encourage their support for women's involvement in these processes. Further, hosting meetings and consultations in locations and at times accessible to women is important, as well as providing safe and comfortable environments for women to feel confident to speak. Recognising the different communication needs of diverse religious and ethnic groups will also help to promote broader involvement of women in their community's governance processes.

In Fiji, feedback and complaints mechanisms in local councils are few and are generally not well known by women. This is because women have limited engagement in governance activities and may not be aware of their right to raise concerns about service provision. In Fiji, council field workers are mostly men (98%), which may have significant impacts on the ability of women to be heard on the impacts of and concerns about the council's programs, as speaking directly to men about these issues can conflict with cultural norms. Additionally, male staff are more likely to speak to community leaders, who are traditionally men, and are thus not likely to gain an understanding of the different issues faced by women in the community.

There are very few avenues for women or men to comment on delivery of services or get involved in the monitoring and evaluation process of councils. Fiji's councils are realising the value of customer satisfaction surveys in assessing the outreach, and effectiveness of council services,

In 2009, Sigatoka Town Council launched a client satisfaction survey to gain an understanding of levels of satisfaction with services provided by the council

Historically, council documents have not been readily accessible to the public. Whilst council plans and budgets are submitted to the central government, they are not always made available publicly, and account audits are often delayed and behind schedule. Documents that are made available are rarely translated into local languages. Although English is the official language in Fiji, very few speak this as a first language. This impacts on women's ability to be informed and therefore participate effectively.

'Women have the right to equal access to the services of local governments, as well as the right to be treated equally in these services and to be able to influence the initiation, development, management and monitoring of services.' (IULA Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government)

New approaches to consultation are emerging within some councils, based on a growing recognition of the need to cater to different needs of women and men, that women need safe spaces to share their views, and that involving women's organisations in consultation process can strengthen service outcomes,

Lami Town Council held a friendly consultation with women in the marketplace around a morning tea to keep in touch with challenges and opportunities to improve the marketplace

Sigatoka Town Council has helped to facilitate a Sigatoka Women's League made up of women in the council, market vendors, businesses and community representatives

Sigatoka and Labasa Town Councils have facilitated workshops for women in the local community on the role of local government, barriers, strategies to participation and concepts of gender responsive budgeting

Councils are also recognising that they can promote awareness of particular gendered issues by targeting women or men directly in places frequented by them,

The UNIFEM market project is assisting councils to establish booths in three markets (Suva, Nausori, Sigatoka) to increase women's access information on a range of issues and services, including violence against women

Increased knowledge sharing and feedback processes for constituents will lead to better services, more efficient use of scarce resources and more informed decision-making by local leaders and council management as well as increased community support for council decisions.

Whilst many NGOs are active in advocating for women's needs in national policy, local government issues are often overlooked by these agencies. Likewise, local governments overlook the value of these organisations. Partnerships between councils and women's organisations have the potential to be extremely effective. Women organisations have access to networks of women who can be enlisted to support councils to achieve shared goals through targeted projects as well as provide councils will access to expertise and tools in areas of consultation, inclusive participatory processes, as well as gender, human rights, anti-discrimination, violence against women and training and research.

## Issues of Concern to Women

Whilst local governments in Fiji have not had a consistent approach to gender aware service delivery, or engaging women in consultation and planning processes, there are a number of recent examples of individual councils taking steps to involve women and their needs in key planning and service delivery processes. These good practices are a strong foundation for Fiji's local councils to recognise the benefits and value of engaging and planning for women alongside men, and for promoting the use of gender analysis across all policy and program decisions and the genuine engagement of women and men in both consultation and decision making processes.



### *Water and Electricity*

Water and electricity are two of the basic services that can make a substantial difference to the daily lives of women; greatly reducing the burden of finding fuel for cooking and heating; enhancing security and learning possibilities for children. While local governments in Fiji do not provide these services they are responsible for regulating land use, particularly in informal settlements where women are most vulnerable.

Councils are currently negotiating new by-laws on subdivision of land, to help fast-track informal settlement upgrading and ensure infrastructure standards are cost effective therefore enabling increased access by poorer households.

### *Environment and Health*

Health promotion is often seen as a woman's role in Pacific communities, due to their role in the family supporting their children's development and education. Targeting women specifically for public health campaigns is important for this reason, as is ensuring that men are also involved and take a shared responsibility with women to create change. Recently one council started a campaign to target women specifically to promote their role in community based health activities.

Lami Town Council has been working to increase the participation of women (and youth) in civic life, in particular to improve civic pride and environmental awareness.

Labasa Town Council commenced a litter campaign including engaging young women and men in the painting of new rubbish bins in the central street to encourage greater ownership and use.

### *Sanitation*

Access to good-quality public toilet facilities is a fundamental need for women; ensuring their ability to undertake everyday activities such as working, shopping, use of public transport, caring for children, elderly and disabled and recreation activities. There are some councils who see the provision of public toilets as a high priority. These councils recognise the vital contribution a well designed, planned and maintained service can make to public health and safety, general quality of life and image of the local area in terms of local economic development and tourism. Including women in the design and management of toilet facilities can make a big difference between the use and non-use of these facilities.

Several councils have started to investigate options to upgrade public toilets, including baby changing and sanitary facilities as well as eco-friendly designs that are self-cleaning.

A UNIFEM Pacific project on improving municipal markets is investigating opportunities for women to be involved in micro-enterprise activities such as management of toilet facilities in markets.

### *Public Safety and Security*

Local governments have a critical role to play in creating safe communities; adequate street lighting, design of public spaces parks, bus stands etc reduce the risk of sexual assault and violence for women in particular. A number of councils have responded to the need for public safety and security for both women and men, creating programs that address the specific needs faced by women and men in their communities.

A number of councils (Ba, Lautoka, Suva) are in the process of establishing overnight facilities for market vendors, who are predominately women to improve safety and convenience; women often arrive at markets as early as

3am, or sleep the night in public spaces near the market prior to a day of trading.

A number of Councils, in partnership with the local police stations and national government have launched 'Crime Free Zones' to increase public safety and respond to violence against women in their communities.

Lami and Nasinu Town Councils have lobbied for funding to improve street lighting in informal settlements to increase safety and security for residents.

In 2007, Suva City Council initiated a project to involve men and boys in neighbourhood watch networks and community policing to end local crime and violence

Some councils are starting to consider involvement in women's campaigns such as 'Take back the Night' and the '16 Days Activism Against Violence Against Women'.

## **Key Actions**

The restoration of democratic processes in national and local level government in Fiji is necessary to improve women's *political voice*. However, women's *decision-making, design, and consumer voice* can all be elevated in municipal council programs by:

- empowering women council staff to engage in local government decision-making processes and raise concerns of women in these processes;
- support municipal government to analyse the differential impacts of programs on women and men and the knock on effects for the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery
- working with men and women in municipal government to see the value of women's different experiences and opinions in planning, design and monitoring service delivery;
- strengthening relationships and understanding between women council staff and women's community organizations and networks;
- support councils to use targeted and gender specific consultation processes in decision making that promote women's and men's voices;
- work with field staff on engaging with women and men in safe spaces at the community level.
- Work with community leaders to promote the value of women's role in governance processes

### *Transport and mobility*

The multiple roles of women mean they must often take several short trips in a day and are more likely to use public transport, rather than men. Well designed, planned and maintained public transport facilities, footpaths and other local infrastructure reduces the burden on women's access between home and work, shops, schools, health facilities etc. A number of councils are responding to the need to upgrade footpaths in key parts of the city and marketplaces to improve convenience and access by women who often travel with children, the elderly and disabled.

Ba Town Council is planning to improve the width of pathways between market stalls within the marketplace to ensure access by women (and men) with children and prams.

### *Housing*

In Fiji, rapid urbanisation is a key challenge for local councils and the planning of cities and towns. Urbanisation is increasingly accompanied by a diversity of household types, with single female-headed households emerging as an important and growing household form. The equality and fair distribution and allocation of land and housing has the potential to change women's lives substantially. Whilst local governments are not directly responsible for housing, councils have the opportunity to motivate funds from government for special projects which allow them to subdivide land and build houses for low income groups, including women. This also facilitates improved access to other services including water, electricity and sanitation.

### *Local Economic Development*

In Fiji women play an important role in the informal sector, selling handicrafts and agricultural produce in markets and road side stalls. Informal businesses can be attractive to women as they provide flexible working arrangements that fit with women's household and community responsibilities, alongside low set-up and entrance requirements. However, as they are largely unregulated, these businesses can also pose risks to personal safety, job and food security. Recently, a few councils with the support of UNIFEM and CLGF have started creating policies to promote and support women's key role in agricultural and handicraft production in Fiji through skills development, marketplace development, and support services catered to women market-sellers needs.

Councils are helping local women access economic opportunities by using their own resources and skills to produce traditional ceremonial items used by the council such as a salusalu or garland for local events

Labasa Town Council has been investigating the establishment of a childcare facility that meets the needs of women in the marketplace

Lami Town Council is supporting women in informal settlements to establish micro-enterprise activities using handicraft. Council has agreed to provide space for day sales/craft fair every three months.

A UNIFEM Pacific project on improving municipal markets is investigating opportunities for improving market facilities, sensitization of market by-laws and establishment of micro-enterprise activities (such as management of toilet facilities) for women

## **Conclusion**

In Fiji, women's engagement in local governance has traditionally been low, despite the need for service delivery to cater for their different perspectives and requirements.

Whilst women's political voice is currently constrained in Fiji, local governments can take direct action to promote women's voice in the design of government services and as consumers of those services. Local government needs to become more accountable to women and men, as well as actively involving them in all aspects of decision-making and local governance in order to effectively promote democracy in Fiji.

Information about gender issues and women's engagement in some areas of local government service delivery are only beginning to emerge. However, there are positive signs that some of the recent concerns being placed on the agendas of local councils are as a result of women's participation and that councils are taking more interest in directly involving women in some initiatives.

Assessing local government service provision through a gender lens affords an opportunity to enhance civic participation, transparency, accountability, cost effectiveness and creativity. The more women and men engage with the local government processes, the more relevant services will become with impacts on their utilization rates.

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