

SCEFI EMBLEMATIC STORIES

Drekenikelo Masturatt Forum
and Naari Shakti Women's Club:

Women Empowerment through Community Action



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The series of emblematic stories under the Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI) were developed in collaboration with the relevant civil society organisations, with contributions from:

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SUMMARY

Critical issues affect the wellbeing of women in the communities of the informal settlements of Nausori, Tailevu province, Fiji. One such issue is domestic violence which is rarely addressed at community level due to an entrenched culture of silence. As a result, perpetrators of domestic violence act with impunity, often in collusion with other males in the community and sometimes the police. In 2014, with the support of UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI), two women's groups in Nausori, Drekenikelo Masturatt Forum (DMF) and Naari Shakti Women's Club (NSWC) respectively, launched training initiatives to raise awareness and to seek broader community collaboration on the well being of women and "strong" family foundation. Planning and implementing these initiatives opened the way for the women to become active community organizers, as they successfully mobilized broad support from community members, leaders and organizations.

INTRODUCTION

The predominantly Indo-Fijian communities in the rural informal settlements of Nausori town and Tailevu province, like other rural communities in Fiji, have long felt disempowered and marginalized. There are few mechanisms in Fiji for Indo-Fijian and mixed communities to discuss social problems with policy-makers. For one, individual self-help has long been the primary survival strategies of Indo-Fijian families. Their local decision-making structures are less integrated into vertical decision making platforms. Collective decision-making is seen as a prerogative of male elders and male heads of households, excluding women and young people. Such exclusion poses a challenge to addressing social problems that affect a key segment of the community. The continued exclusion of young people in decision-making processes, for example, leads to increased rejection by young people of cultural norms, increased alienation and emigration to urban centers. The failure to include women in decision-making processes that impact their lives causes family disputes often involving domestic violence.

Discussion of social problems such as domestic violence is taboo, as an entrenched culture of silence permeates Fijian society on sensitive and difficult issues. Drekenikelo Masturatt Forum (DMF) in Nausori and Naari Shakti Women's Club (NSWC) in Tailevu are two women's groups in Fiji which independently reached out to UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI), urged by an imperative that conditions for women in their communities were in critical need of change. Both DMF and NSWC are groups started by Indo-Fijian housewives, and their membership comprises mostly women who are housewives with secondary school education. Most of the women come

from a background of relative economic and domestic stability, have children who are grown up, and therefore of an age and in a position where they can reach out to younger women in their communities who were struggling to raise children in impoverished and often violent circumstances.

In 2014, the two groups separately submitted proposals to SCEFI focusing on the empowerment of women in their respective communities through a training programme to raise awareness. Both obtained support from SCEFI which helped them implement projects that involved training, engagement with strategic partners, and community dialogue.



Photo Credit: UNDP

PROCESS: FRAMING THE ISSUE AND IMPLEMENTING THE TRAINING

At the start of their projects both DMF and NSWC faced the challenge of how to address the issues of domestic violence and inequality without provoking a backlash from men in their communities, which would only marginalise the women further. Another was the challenge of being proactive and engaging with government and other stakeholders as collaborative partners. The two groups greatly benefitted from the SCEFI's outreach support strategy, which included information sessions for SCEFI grantees (see Box 1). DWF and NSWC representatives attended SCEFI's information sessions which helped guide discussions with their groups on how best to approach the challenges identified. With inputs from the SCEFI facilitator, the women were able to hone in on what they needed to be do and the approach they would take to implement their plans.



Photo Credit: UNDP

BOX 1. How SCEFI Supports Civic Engagement in Local Communities

UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI) is a three year project (2013-2016) aimed at strengthening peaceful and inclusive development in Fiji by enabling citizens to engage in community activities. It emphasises fostering democracy from the bottom up, and as such, the strengthening of collaboration between decision-makers and citizens. SCEFI is organized around six core themes: transformative leadership, non-discrimination and inclusiveness, equitable service delivery, accountability and human rights, voice and choice, decision making and coalition building.

SCEFI's outreach strategy involved receiving proposals and funding projects of civic engagement across Fiji. Towards this objective, it recruited and trained 11 local facilitators who visited Fiji's 14 provinces and conducted 236 information sessions that reached over 3,000 people in 2014. SCEFI facilitators were critical to realizing the Initiative's aim of targeting far-flung communities and citizens groups, and identifying emblematic projects which represented empowerment, self-help and collaborative action.

Through the outreach effort, 88 project proposals in total were submitted for consideration. Facilitators also helped organizations to prepare grant proposals. Once the grant proposals were approved, representatives of each organization attended a three-day training workshop where grantees were informed about SCEFI's overall objectives and provided support on management and reporting requirements. The training provided skill-building and information on key concepts such as civic engagement and strengthening collaboration between government and civil society. Facilitators also provided mentoring and facilitation support to grantees during project implementation, and assisted with reporting and financial requirements.

- ▶ Gaining support from the community and husbands: Members of both groups shared their initial proposals with their community elders, and broadly received support from their husbands towards their initiatives. Husbands of some of the women involved organized kava sessions on the porch outside the house where meetings with the SCEFI facilitator were held, and also shared their inputs. Consequently, the projects enjoyed the active support of the women's husbands from the beginning.
- ▶ Building networks and alliances: Participating in the SCEFI induction workshop and support from the SCEFI facilitator made members of DMF and NSMC realize the value of developing connections with outside service providers and networks. At the start of the project, DMF established connections with various faith based organizations as well as government service providers. These included the Legal Aid Commission, Community Police Department, Adolescent Health Department of Nausori Health Centre, FNU Community Support Programme, Department of Women, Department of Social Welfare, AWQAF Fiji, and Naari Shakti. The SCEFI facilitator helped broker new connections for NSMC by introducing both groups to organizations such as the Fiji Women's Crisis Center, FemLINKPACIFIC, the Fiji Alliance for Mental Health, Empower Pacific, Fiji Women Rights Movement, UN Women, Ministry for Women and Social Welfare and Provincial Authorities. Since many of these organizations received support from SCEFI, the facilitator was able to capitalize on existing collaboration and synergies with similar projects. These connections proved extremely beneficial for the two groups. Organisations such as Informal Education Consultants, UN Women, and Justice and Development Commission sent trainers to collaborate on the workshops.
- ▶ Training approach: Both groups planned on using SCEFI funds to deliver a training programme targeted towards the women of

their communities. Rather than framing the programme as an anti-domestic violence initiative, they adopted a broader approach. Their training programmes covered a broad range of topics: family and engaged citizenship, healthy living, time-management, self-esteem and confidence building, climate change issues, gardening, self-employment training, and health topics such as waste management, non-communicable diseases and HIV/AIDS.

This broad approach facilitated community buy-in by emphasising adherence to strong and positive community values. The groups also discussed the concept of social cohesion (to which they were introduced during the SCEFI training), to emphasise that collaboration and shared decision-making within the family was fundamental to community stability and wellbeing.

NSMC, the smaller of the two organizations, organized its two-day workshop on December 3-4, 2014 on a budget of FJD 4,000. The workshop was attended by 38 predominantly female participants. The training was supported by the SCEFI facilitator to enlist the participation of relevant speakers and facilitate parts of the workshops. NSMC's training programme was complemented with on-going mentoring of young women in the community by its core members.

DMF, with a budget of FJD 10,000, held a total of 11 training events that were attended by a total of 551 participants and covered an array of topics, including diet, exercise, and HIV/AIDS, which was a new topic for most participants. All agreed that it was important to talk about these health-related issues and that they should not be taboo at home and community discussions.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

- ▶ **Self-empowerment:** The process of applying for the SCEFI grants, undergoing training, and implementing a programme on the ground became an important learning experience and source of empowerment for the women of NSMC and DMF. In the space of a few months, the women went from being primarily housewives to active community mobilisers and social innovators, who reached out to their communities, external networks and service providers. Furthermore, their connection to FemLINKPACIFIC helped the women gain confidence as they shared their stories on FemLINKPACIFIC's radio station.
- ▶ **Broad outreach:** Through a spill-over effect the training initiatives reached beneficiaries beyond their targeted audiences. A school teacher from Dilkusha Girls High School, for example, who attended DMF's workshop shared what she learned with other teachers and students. DMF also reached out to Jamia Taleem-UI-Quran Lil Banaa, a religious school for Muslim girls where the topic of HIV/AIDS had always been a taboo issue. After discussion with the governing body, the Fiji Zanana Muslim league, the students welcomed the opportunity to discuss this



Photo Credit: UNDP

sensitive topic, which led to a good exchange of ideas and experiences.

► Support of husbands: The support of the husbands was of critical importance to the success of both the initiatives. The approach implemented by NSMC and DMF resonated with men's identity as "guarantors" and "protectors" of safety in the community. The women groups identified that the single most effective way to end domestic violence in Indo-Fijian communities was for older men in the community to demand a better standard of behavior from the younger men who looked to them as role models. The husbands, through the "porch" discussions, came to understand their critical role in addressing the problem of domestic violence, and agreed to support their wives in their endeavors. None of the targeted beneficiaries complained that their attendance was restricted by their male partners, an important indicator of the community's acceptance of the initiative.

► Increased legitimacy: Obtaining funds from UNDP gave the grant recipients credibility and status in their respective communities. It also allowed them to engage more constructively with civil society and government structures, particularly with local authorities.

► Expanded networks and reciprocity: In the case of both projects the groups were able to "activate" established networks and expand them. The groups joined FemLINKPACIFIC's network and now participate regularly in radio talk shows and dialogue. They are also now better positioned to pursue funding opportunities with donors such as the European Union and UN Women. Networking connections to other organizations have enabled the two women groups to participate in new collaborative initiatives such as one between DMF and Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) which enabled the former to create better services that are relevant to the needs of that community. The connection between

DMF and FWCC also opened the path for more women to access the services of FWCC.

- ▶ Access to marginalized groups: Connections made through their training initiatives enabled NSMC and DMF to collaborate with people of different faiths and cultures, leading to new relationships and greater social cohesion. The two groups, for example, successfully gained the endorsement of the Muslim Imams in the community, and the support of religious leaders enabled participation of many Muslim women in the training. An Imam and his wife committed to providing the required follow-up within their community, and to engage with DMF on community issues.
- ▶ Enhanced access to services: The connections the groups made with government service providers, such as the Ministry of Social Welfare, led them to organize information sessions in their respective communities on how to better access different government services and opportunities. For example, community members received information on the country's new Child Policy and young single mothers signed up for government assistance. Increased connections of the two groups with organizations such as the Fiji Council for Disabled Persons Federation, helped address the needs of the disabled community members. Government ministries sought out both women's groups as partners in the access of services by their communities.
- ▶ Access to career opportunities: Two active members of DMF were identified to be trained by the Nausori Health Centre to operate a community dispensary. Other women in these groups were identified to receive training in counseling to support families affected by domestic violence.

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ The process of planning and implementing their projects expanded both women groups' networks with civil society and government. This proved to have significant benefits and opened the pathway for better access to a variety of services, learning, and other unforeseen opportunities.
- ▶ In the process of administering a small grant on the ground, the women's groups acquired skills in areas such as leadership, public speaking, project management and implementation, report writing, evaluation, budget development, and proposal writing.
- ▶ The collaborative approach in the training implemented by the two groups enabled them to avoid any form of community backlash or from certain segments of the population. Moreover, through a carefully thought out approach they were able to hold free and frank conversations on health topics that needed attention but were rarely openly discussed.
- ▶ SCEFI proved to be an effective medium in identifying social innovators within communities through proper training, to the point where skill building and self-confidence in recipients became self-propelling. This can be an effective means of building social capital, cohesive communities and creating the kind of citizens that are committed and engaged in democratic governance.



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