

'Being RAMSI Gender and Governance Coordinator - challenges and celebrations'

Dr Marilyn Waring, Keynote speaker at Pacific Women's Watch (NZ) AGM 2011 [1]

Background: RAMSI's intervention in Solomon Islands [Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands] began in 2003 See: www.ramsi.org/ for history, more info.

Marilyn recalled: When RAMSI arrived, they only invited men to the formal peace talks(!) whereas many people know that the women had been championing the peace talks for many years – Marilyn recounted how women, after much discussion re how to stop indiscriminate killing, went to the front line to initiate peace talks. They took 'necessities'- food and cigarettes, had huge difficulty in finding transport and ended up walking last few miles....

Huge problems: Inadequate data on population statistics – difficult to access the inadequate electoral rolls – dead people still enrolled, many inaccuracies. You can only vote if you are physically present yourself in the constituency you are registered in – some spent most of polling day trying to find which roll they were on... No provisions for people who are off the island on any given polling day – eg fishermen and young adults away from home in boarding schools so unable to vote – even having elections is a major feat

Police were sent from across Pacific region to recruit /establish new police academy – Solomons' women now have largest contingent of policewomen in the South Pacific

Police Commissioner in Solomons would not allow women to drive the police vehicles and policewomen were not licensed to drive – Marilyn tried very hard to get this changed, but was not successful.

SI has a Corruption Commissioner - very busy person. Bribery can be with cash and/or goods – MPs that have served time in prison for corruption can be re-elected immediately.

1978 – MPs Bob Tizard (Labour) and Marilyn (National) were sent to Kiribati and Solomon Islands to work with newly elected MPs in these newly independent nations on how to interpret 'Parliamentary standing orders'. But Parliamentary Standing Orders on Westminster lines are hardly appropriate to a Pacific nation - re content and language etc,,,

All male parliament is the norm in SI – not unlike a number of parliaments in the Pacific – Pacific has the lowest ratio of women to men in parliament anywhere in the world - only four per cent. There are high rewards for those elected to parliamentary office. Unspeakably corrupt. "Voted" and "regulated". Mr Philip [2], likely supported STM because the men in parliament want to form political parties to get more money....

Solomons recognises Taiwan and MPs receive money accordingly. If you recognise China you may have new sports stadium built whereas Taiwan brings a 'Taiwanese suitcase' . Both Chinas and a number of other countries are becoming very interested in the Pacific. Fish was always thought of as Pacific's best resource – only fish left are bait standard. Solomons' forests will be gone in 3-4 years (Vanuatu's almost gone now).

People are coming back to the Pacific. Canadians are mining gold in PNG, Cook Islands is swarming with foreigners, especially people searching for manganese, yttrium (important for IT industry); and Nauru has uranium. USAid is not just back in the Pacific because China is, Pacific is an important sphere of influence [over 20 nations each with seat/vote at UN.] The EU never left, the Canadians left and now they are back - CIDA. Pacific is a 'turbulent wash' of those with money to spend for further mining, exploitation of resources etc.

During her RAMSI contract Marilyn worked closely with Alice Pollard who did her PhD in Women in Politics in Solomons – Victoria University. They inherited a terms of reference (TOR) very typical of a multilateral organisation. First output was meant to be the election of women to parliament.

"Alice and I could have shrugged our shoulders and run screaming from the room... It didn't seem likely that TOR could be achieved" situation where women couldn't vote but they could stand – Lily Posnanski stood during transitional government. Marilyn and Alice wanted to find out more about her. Some years later Hilda Kari was elected to parliament – had been president of NCW, was tied up with YWCA.

After 'the troubles' people stopped talking to each other. "When you are just surviving, the margins of those you trust gets smaller and smaller – our job was to "mend the net" '.

Marilyn and Alice started with food and got women together who may not have spoken in some years. eg. women teachers wanted to know "How do we run our schools if the people who have the cheque books and are on the committee don't want to come to committee meetings?" We called it "governance training" – with church minister often in the chair and so we began to collect stories... eg through activities such as 'Role plays': "What would you do if...."– eg a church minister requested they address that "many casinos are being built... and people are scared to vote NO." Marilyn: "If we called it "governance training" then we could encompass it all – we could have teachers, NGOs, women from groups negotiating with palm oil companies + +...."

With respect to number of women appointed to anything – there were 37 names going round in circles...so we decided we would build a women's appointment file so that the Ministers would not have the excuse, "We can't find any qualified women". Marilyn and Alice developed a template for a Solomon Islands CV. "We encouraged women to fill out many pages for example about voluntary work in the community/church/with children – paid work became more secondary and everyone had plenty to write – everything was put into a big spreadsheet...Names of over 100 women were delivered to Speaker's office, Ministry of Women's Affairs and so on ..."

Marilyn read from her journal at the time to highlight other activities she was involved in. She ran an exercise with officials from ministries of tourism, fisheries, agriculture – presentation given on funds available. For many people, to think critically was intimidating and frightening: Marilyn shared the example of a rural fishermen's livelihood exercise she ran– for fishing and fish shop and processing activities. Criteria to apply for loan included: need boat and engine – but this knocks out all women involved in fish processing - 'critical thinking' is so very important.

All SI MPs (past and present) and their families, if/when sick, are flown to Australia. Anecdotal story about an MP's friend going to Honiara clinic – "the man was so horrified by conditions at clinic that there was a Parliamentary Select Committee called on the conditions of the hospital! At that point we also discovered that no women had ever appeared in front of a select committee as independent submitters on an issue, to make their point. So this became a task to work on. The women wrote a submission on a bill for MPs – more men, more money and women made a submission to that select committee – need to practise recognised.... That was a very important experience for women – now - having been in the building, having made a submission, knowing how to behave / how to speak – they were practising for presenting findings on upcoming study on violence based on a tried and tested WHO survey.[3]

45 women conducting interviews, using National Statistic Office data frames. Sample cohort was female 15-49 y/o. Survey was 45 pages long – took over 2 hours to administer. Before and as the women went into the field, there had to be preparation to counsel the interviewers on what they would be hearing and recording. Work was demanding, traumatic – in the field for 22 weeks with one rest day in every seven, canoe problems and isolation also stressors. House -hold response rate was 98%, individual response rate 97%. Women within Honiara less likely to report violence; minority/rarely reported to police. In interviews, 64% of women reported partner violence. Women feared the violence of 'the troubles' and women continue to live in fear – unbelievable rate of abuse. One (fear) comes from churches that are Old Testament dependent when they excuse or validate male partner violence. Only a few women pastors in SI (and across the Pacific). In SI, one can only become a pastor after being invited - and women are never invited. Denial and silencing and treatment as second class citizens is omnipresent.

SI Constitution says: every child has the right to 'firm discipline' and 'The right to firm discipline happens in an environment of respect'... Solomon Islands is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children have to participate in community or religious activities. Reasonable chastisement of children by parents. Women have the right to 'full equality'....but civil and cultural rights are left out.

SI history of political parties complicates things...there were 16-17 women candidates in the last election – we worked with them on doing a constituency profile so that they had plenty of information and lots to talk about when campaigning – there are FM stations on every island – talkback shows etc... but lots of mountainous areas, no real infrastructure... "if only we had some

money we could work really well” was frequently heard’. Marilyn’s reply is that ‘You can’t win the seat of xxxx from Honiara – you have to go to xxxx’.. Everyone’s so used to the men coming in and buying the votes – people forget how to run a campaign.... However, some men don’t buy votes...one man walked and walked and walked and talked and won...

Marilyn: I don’t know how women are ever going to win seats in the parliament – which brings me back to Lily Posnanski. Nothing is known about this woman – hard to find any info. This provoked me to ask if there is anything to read about Solomons women...- but I found nothing to read. So for another piece of TOR – “mentoring of women in the public service” – we decided that one of the most important things for women around ‘mentoring’ was stories. Stories of women that went before, that did things women didn’t think they had the courage to do – and so the book was started. Adding in the woman who was currently clerk of the house, the only women who had ever been MP...etc – we would get about 16 names.

Marilyn and Alice devised a life history interview schedule.... went back and forth for interview taping, transcribing, editing etc...’ [See media item on next page]

M: Keep an eye out for “Being the First” – when we produced this, it was a ‘first’... Women from Niue, Tuvalu, Kiribati don’t have a history of their women – nor Tonga.... these women don’t have these herstories. And it’s easier to silence a gender when they have nothing to stand with. Easier to say “this is how you women are/this is how you behave...”. Each woman’s story in the book stands as a quiet story – there are no claims to assault/ abuse/ discrimination – not in plain language, but the hints are there... the stories are there for that collective sense....

Many challenges remain in the Solomons. NZAid is paying for primary school is making a huge difference – NZ has to stay funding primary education//

Marilyn concluded: I have just started new work for the Commonwealth Secretariat – the UN’s Commission on Status of Women theme next year is social protection and rural women – extending social protection to communal forestry, communal fisheries, widows’ inheritance rights,.. are all threatened when ADB, World Bank come in and private land ownership is championed ~ such ‘solutions’ can undermine the existing forms of Pacific/indigenous organisation.

Postscript:

Women MPs from across the Pacific met at Parliament, Wellington in March 2011 to discuss female representation in politics.

The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Pacific region gender and democracy seminar theme was "**women as agents of change**". Attendees included women MPs and representation, they said in a statement. “Having more women MPs means candidates from Bougainville, the Cook Islands, Niue, Nauru, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Tonga.

Less than 4 percent of all elected representatives in the Pacific region are women. CWP New Zealand co-chairwomen Jackie Blue and Carmel Sepuloni said that figure was "abysmal" compared to other regions.

Women across the region shared significant inequalities that needed to be overcome by ensuring women had meaningful that there will be greater prioritisation of women’s issues on the political agenda and in policy development."

The seminar’s topics included campaigning, the role of NGOs in increasing female participation, media training, and practical sessions on parliamentary business and drafting bills. Dr Marilyn Waring and Dr Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop facilitated a discussion session [4];

Parliamentary Speaker Lockwood Smith said a report from the seminar would hopefully become a road-map for women seeking election

[1] Notes on Dr Marilyn Waring’s keynote address by Jaclyn Bonnici – augmented by Beverley Turner

[2] Mr Danny Philip: elected as Prime Minister, 24 August,2011 following SI General Elections on 4 Aug 2011

[3] VAW is endemic in Pacific Island communities – huge issue and has been very high on list for UNIFEM Pacific, now UN Women Pacific – there is a special dedicated Trust Fund etc.

[4] “Gender and democracy in the Pacific – why do we need to increase women’s parliamentary representation in the region?....” Both presenters are Associate Professors at AUT/Auckland.

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From: Pacific Media Watch nius <pacific_media_watch_list@aut.ac.nz>

Review: Being the First:

Storis Blong Oloketa Mere lo Solomon Aelen:

Editors: Alice Pollard and Marilyn Waring. RAMSI: Honiara, Solomon Islands

WOMEN'S STORIES OF TENACITY

<http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=170990>

By Don Gibson

SUVA (*Kaila/Fiji Times/Pacific Media Watch*): Laced with culture and tradition, aspects of the South Pacific have always battled with the idea of change. The Solomon Islands has proven to be no exception, and the publishing of *Being the First: Storis Blong Oloketa Mere lo Solomon Aelen* is testimony to just that.

Featuring 14 accomplished Solomon Islands women, the book explores the many struggles faced by these different women, sexism and job discrimination in particular.

Compiled and edited by Alice Pollard and Marilyn Waring, the women discussed the problems associated with "systems", a word that in the Pacific context proves to be terribly loaded.

Regarded as barrier breakers, the women in this book show an unshakeable tenacity, being contributors to the first book published in 50 years that maps the achievements of local women written by local women themselves.

From the likes of Hilda Kari, the only female member of the Solomon Islands Parliament in the post-independence period (1978-2010), to those of local hero, Phyllis Talokwai, these women prove that the wounds created from colonialism can be treated; not through luck, but through determination and acceptance of change.

Constantly acclaimed throughout the book by the other women, Phyllis becomes the initialiser of change as well as the epitome of the successful woman by challenging these systems and taking decision-making rights out of the hands of prejudice.

Through these systems, women were virtually deprived of many if not all forms of labour that included intelligence.

With colonialism came the rule of a foreign culture in the Solomon Islands, and with this ruling came the branding of female duties, the main one being nursing. Females were discouraged from taking part in other communal duties, to the point of them being disallowed into the education system.

With feminists having quite the field day with the text, it was somewhat upsetting to see that the average age of marriage was 21 years, with the exception of Elizabeth. Had Elizabeth not been informed by her New Zealand-based brother that there was no absolute need for her to be married, she would have been married at 18.

Here, readers are forced to examine the extent to which culture affected male as well as female behaviour and their acceptance of gender roles.

Throughout the text, women constantly refer to the roles of males and females because of their exposure to age-old cultural norms.

These cultural mindsets meant that problems such as discrimination and sexism stood out immensely, accentuating the lengths to which the women in the book fought to get to where they are now.

The University of the South Pacific (USP) played a large part in shaping these women, influencing the way in which decisions were made. It was in a less narrow-minded environment that they were pushed to excel in male dominated areas such as Economics and Business Studies.

It was also a time to experiment in terms of balancing workload with relationships, something that according to many of the women was needed to gain exposure before returning home and settling down.

Although culture proved to be a barrier for many women, it also taught them to appreciate religious beliefs.

Religion was key for these women, allowing them time for personal reflection and teaching them to cultivate integrity and composure for such challenging times.

Phyllis Talokwai recalls how she had to battle through systems and systems of cheating people getting to the top of the success ladder without having had any experience. It was at times like these that she remembers turning to her religious beliefs for strength and comfort.

It was obviously a challenge for the featured women to relive some of their toughest moments in life, being subjected to systems of unrewarded labour, unfair dealings and being told that their place was not in the education system.

It is therefore necessary that we salute them for their efforts in re-telling these stories for the benefit of others, to educate and inspire young women and men of this era about determination and necessity in a changing world.

If inspiration is what you are looking for, I recommend *Being the First* for everything it can provide.

But I definitely think that the book needed much more depth in terms of the women rewriting their actual experiences and it doesn't take a Salman Rushdie to do that.

Take for example, you read something as compelling as *Angela's Ashes* and then pick up this book hoping that it will be able to allow you to empathize (even a little bit) with these women's situations, but the truth is, their situations are seemingly mundane. If someone's life is boring, why would anyone even attempt to empathize?