



(<https://www.facebook.com/femlinkpacific>)



(<https://twitter.com/femlinkpacific>)



(<https://www.youtube.com/user/femlinkpac>)



(<https://soundcloud.com/femlinkpacific>)

Here Are The Women (2017): Nila Rao (/index.php/en/actions/here-are-the-women/504-here-are-the-women-2017-nila-rao)



By Alisia Evans



“I think (for) myself and the other (female) advisory councillor for Rakiraki, we have proved to the people that no matter (what happens) like how intense the cyclone was, (or) whatever we had to go through, we did whatever we were supposed to do.”

Nila Rao has certainly shown her true mettle especially since Severe Tropical Cyclone (TC) Winston. Born and bred in Rakiraki, the 62 year old retired high school teacher has been a steadfast and unwavering leader for her community of Caulasi – a population of 430 residents.

Throughout her life, Rao has been dedicated to helping others. After graduating from the University of the South Pacific with a Bachelor of Arts degree, Rao became a Food and Nutrition teacher in 1975. For the following 34 years, she played a key role in shaping the minds of hundreds students who passed through her classroom.

While she retired in 2009, a life of leisure did not sit well with Rao.

A natural born leader, she made a decision that would shape the next chapter of her life - in 2010, an active participant in her local government, Rao became a member of the Rakiraki Town Council. Five years later she would take up the

mantle of advisory councillor - a position she continues to hold to this day.

In February 2016, Rao faced perhaps the most difficult of challenges as advisory councillor to the 129 households living in Caulasi. TC Winston was an event like no other and pushed Rao to the limits of her strength.

“I was supposed to look at the damage and assess the damage and then pass it on,” she recounted in an interview with femLINKpacific in mid-August last year. “I was the first one to respond and assess the damage and (I) passed on this information to Provincial Administrator and DISMAC.”

“Then the roads were closed, the power lines were down, the posts were down. We couldn’t take a vehicle, so I had to walk from house to house assessing the damage.”

That assessment involved writing down the number of members in each family in her community so that there was enough emergency rations for each of the 129 households.

“So what I did was, I did the assessment and then I passed it on...(but) I had to walk five to six kilometers to reach the (town) centre,” Rao continued.

As a result of her dedication and willingness to serve her community, Rao successfully organised three ration distributions, including the first emergency distribution and two subsequent ones to be delivered to Caulasi - an incredible achievement considering Rao’s personal home was severely damaged by the category 5 cyclone.

Her experience of TC Winston is testament to her commitment to serving her community. Sadly, that commitment has meant that women like Rao, who were actively participating as humanitarian first responders, were more often than not exposed to risks and threats on the frontline.

These risks and threats continued to affect the women in Rao’s community long after the winds and rain brought on by TC Winston had gone.

“Now after TC Winston, what I have noticed (is) that women have to wake up early in the morning to send their husbands and children (to) go school and then they are busy and now after TC (Winston) most of the vegetables and crops are destroyed,” she shared in a district level rural women leader’s meeting in June. “So, now what the women are doing once the husband go to work or school, they are busy on their farms and gardens to plant.”

However difficult the lives of women in her community might be, Rao is not one to focus on the negative. Instead, she champions the resourcefulness and tenacity of women as they try to find additional sources of income to enable them to support their family.

“They are also raising ducks and chicken, so they look at that, and, now that the Penang Mill is closed, most of (their) husbands have lost their jobs,” she added. “Most of these women don’t feel secure anymore.”

“What they are doing, they are trying to grow vegetables to support their food budget and that most of them are looking at other ways of supporting the family now.”

As she enters her second year as Caulasi advisory councillor, Rao has faced both challenges and opportunities but having a support system, that includes her male colleagues, she knows from her own experience during TC Winston, a little can go a long way in enabling other women to take up the post and overcome any challenge.

“Before Winston, it was good but, straight after Winston, men were approaching me in my own home and the tone was frightening,” revealed Rao. “I didn’t feel safe in my own home because at the time I had no electricity.”

“I wanted to resign but the PA and other advisory councillors encouraged me and other women leaders told me to carry on because they told me I was doing the job well.”

