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Here Are The Women (2017): Nirmala Sharma (/index.php/en/actions/here-are-the-women/509-here-are-the-women-2017-nirmala-sharma)



By Sian Rolls



“Women are leaders and farmers too,” said Nirmala Sharma, Vuncuicui Multiracial Women’s Forum Project Manager and member of the Vanua Levu Arya Mahila Mandal, in 2011. “We need more girls trained in the agriculture sector with scholarships allocations and agriculture field officers must visit us and help us with our food garden projects including seed supplies.”

Sharma is a shining example of leadership – the embodiment of dedication, passion and commitment to her community. First involved in femLINKpacific’s network of women leaders in 2009, she has gone on to bring electricity to the Nasoni settlement where she lives.

It was a legacy she has inherited from her mother, she shared in 2013 - a woman who spoke the iTaukei and Hindi languages and as a member of their local district advisory council in Bua, brought water to the community of 20 families.

Through the commitment of other women leaders of the Vunicuicui Multiracial Women’s Forum, the establishment of a co-operative shop was possible, bringing a much needed service to communities 25 kilometers from Labasa town and beyond.

This ingenuity also arose as Sharma and the other women saw the need for alternative sources of income. When she noticed that the sugarcane farm wasn't fully meeting her family's needs, she opted for bee and vegetable farming to supplement their income levels – to assure the human security needs of her family. As the decline of the industry continues, so too the need to find alternative sources of security.

“Now, the price of sugarcane is very low and the demand and the cost of labourers is really very high,” explained Sharma last year. “The farmers, at the end of the day, do not benefit.”

“There is no good profit from this sugarcane farming. If we want the labourers to come and harvest the cane, they demand (a) proper house, electricity, proper water supply.”

But, she underscores that the extra load that women carry must not go unnoticed- especially those involved in mobilising and community work while continuing to support the agricultural and sugar sectors.

“I do the preparation for breakfast and lunch together for the labourers, pack them properly and their clothes and look after the family because I have my in-laws (living with me),” Sharma said. “We are the first to wake up and the last to sleep... (but) we could have sacrificed our sleep more to do all that work (in our homes) to then attend (meetings).”

A champion of community-focused development, she had continued to highlight the challenges of making a living as well as accessing education and accessing basic services like the hospital for years.

For example, Sharma has shared that due to poor road condition in her community, the unsealed track becomes slippery during bad weather and occasionally causes the cane trucks to get stuck on the road. This makes it difficult for other vehicles to pass and means that sugarcane farmers will have to pay an extra cost in hiring the tractor to move the truck – creating more losses they have to look to cover with the price of cane down to just \$60 per tonne this year.

At the same time, education of children is also affected when there are no proper roads. The children are often late for school or leaving the parents to pay extra cost for children to get to school on time.

Persisting, Sharma remains a regular face at femLINKpacific's district, divisional and national consultations as she believes it is critical to access information as it builds up women as leaders in their communities.

“The information I get from the consultation are going back to my organisation,” she outlines, reflecting on her own experiences during the 12th birthday celebrations of FemTALK89FM, femLINKpacific's community radio network. “I share it with my friends, family and also my community.”

“The information we get to become stronger. We able to know where we stand and what can be done to solve issues - (where to go to and whom to go and see).”