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Here Are The Women (2017): Sarojani Gounder (/index.php/en/actions/here-are-the-women/493-here-are-the-women-2017-sarojani-gounder)



By Hannah Hicks



“Culture is a barrier when it comes to women’s participation in club meetings (or) civic education workshops as the men tend to overrule,” outlined Sarojani Gounder. An advisory councilor since 2008, the 54 year old has been serving in communities around Tavua, including in a previous role as a community health worker and a volunteer worker for more than 30 years. Gounder is also actively involved in the Nasivi Women’s Club she founded as well as the Tagitagi Mother’s Sangam and the Sita Ram Women’s Club. She also prides herself in her own endeavors with small business that include garland making for weddings and bridal makeup. During an interview in 2013, she spoke about the lack of access to information that women at the grassroot level faced. Gounder said that in order to increase women’s participation in leadership, there is a need for more awareness programs such as civic education for the women.

“We stay in the rural areas and most of the women are educated but they don’t have the idea of how to go about (it)”, she highlighted.

Gounder reaffirmed the need to invest in women’s equitable access to the media as this will enable them to claim their

communication rights and define their human security priorities.

This gap still exists as local realities continue to be disconnected from the global commitments to the new sustainable development agenda and all other commitments before it like the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

As stated in Article 14 of CEDAW, it requires all parties to take all appropriate measures to ensure that the particular needs of rural women are met and to ensure rural women have access to health care services, training and employment opportunities and social security schemes. Rural women leaders like Gounder are still waiting for these commitments to be realised.

She recalls how after Tropical Cyclone Winston was one of the hardest times of her life as she lost part of her house. Gounder was alone at that time and had to clean up her house on her own and as well play the role as first responder in her community - looking after her neighbours and arranging and organizing the delivery of food rations as well as disseminating information she received via Women's Weather Watch.

femLINKpacific's Women's Weather Watch is a model for monitoring approaching storms and disaster management in their communities and is a continuous campaign that pushes for the inclusion of women in all aspects of disaster preparation, management and rehabilitation which requires equal participation of women. Women's Weather Watch is about bringing greater visibility to women's local experiences and leadership during natural disasters and humanitarian crises situations in Fiji.

"Attending all these (femLINK) workshops, I'm now prepared to send the message to those women's groups that we should be prepared," Gounder shared. "No one was prepared (before TC Winston) because, at that time, we didn't get enough information and people just took it lightly because we didn't know it would be category 5."

"Even people didn't know what is category 5. We didn't have the information even from DISMAC, even from our DO's office. We didn't have any information. The only network we had was femLINK."

Gounder stressed the need for more women to be included in decision making - recommending that all advisory councillors have consultative committees which includes women from local clubs and networks. However, the portrayal of women as victims of natural disasters and climate change rather than as equal partners hinders them from participating in decision making forums that design strategies and agreements.

There is a need to recognize that men and women experience disasters differently depending on their respective roles in society. Thus, humanitarian programmes need to be more than the rebuilding of infrastructure but also scaling up of women's leadership roles – resourcing and supporting the women leaders that are contributing to the rebuilding of communities, including responding to the trauma faced.

Sarojani Gounder is just another example from femLINK's rural network of women leaders that women have a vested interest in early warning and preparedness measures, as well as the response and resilience strategies after humanitarian emergencies.