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Here Are The Women (2017): Tammara Balenaveikau (/index.php/en/actions/here-are-the-women/519-here-are-the-women-2017-tammara-balenaveikau)



by Sian Rolls



“For me, leadership is not about being popular or being elected or having like the big fancy things with a big fancy title,” underscored Tammara Balenaveikau, femLINKpacific’s Programme Manager. “It’s really about... having the responsibility to carry out specific tasks that is required of you and also having the courage to influence – positively influence – and encourage those around you that you work with.”

“I don’t see it as a sort of hierarchy system, it’s something more along the way of working together in a team and having the ability to work with others and share responsibilities, take ownership and just stepping up to what’s being expected.”

Balenaveikau, a former participant of the Generation Next Programme and former producer/broadcaster with FemTALK89FM, is now a member of femLINKpacific’s Management Team – continuing her journey as a young women in the movement for equality, justice and peace.

“When I was still at femLINK (as a volunteer), that was my last year at (university),” she explained last October, just shy of four weeks in her new role at the time. “So, I did an internship as part of my prerequisites for my graduation, in order to graduate.”

“I did a counselling internship with Empower Pacific for three months and then they employed me, so that’s when I left femLINKpacific to join Empower Pacific as a clinical social worker slash counsellor. I stayed there for one and a half years, then I decided to join government. It was a totally different field with how things ran like in an NGO ... there’s a lot of structures and bureaucracy and the whole system, it’s a long process. But a lot of lessons learnt from there which I’m grateful for.”

The former social worker and mental health counsellor at the head of femLINKpacific’s Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Impact (MELI) operations is a firm believer in celebrating your own strengths as one’s own path to leadership.

“You don’t have to be the head girl of a school, because I know particularly in schools like people think that... you have to be a student body leader to become a leader, but you don’t have to,” she shared. “Everyone is unique in their own ways and you don’t have to have a title... it’s the confidence.”

“Everyone is a leader in their own way, everyone have different skills, different strengths and in a way you’ll be able to compliment someone else’s and you can always see yourself taking the lead in that.”

While she took time out of being directly involved in the women’s movement, something she wants more of is skills sharing between leaders, including within civil society, of today and tomorrow.

“I think the important thing is the sustainability,” Balenaveikau said. “Not only the women’s movement but also when we network with other women from outside.”

“Building capacity within the movement and also with women outside and sharing information just so that everyone is also aware and having this on a consistent basis and also the importance of having someone to understudy anybody. It’s not that you understudy and that person will leave soon but also it’s just that sharing and transferring of knowledge from one person to the other so that everyone is on the same page.”

It’s simply about good governance and leadership practices.

“It’s about the leader taking ownership of the role that he or she plays and being accountable to those responsibilities – taking the ownership and carrying out the specific task and being transparent,” Balenaveikau continued. “Transparency for me is key because... if you feel that you have nothing to hide, you’d be transparent – obviously.”

“A good leader would do that - would have one of those as the characteristics (of) being transparent of the dealing that she’s involved in or what actions that they would like to take out.”

When it comes to political participation, she shared that there is still a lot of catching up to do and awareness that young people need. According to Balenaveikau, the culture of politics still needs development as she saw youth being left behind, mystified by jargon from political party mobilisers.

“I guess before elections or before people even ask people to join their (political) spaces... I would recommend them holding out a consultative process on... what’s their space about before inviting people,” she explained.

This is why she wants to see the use of simple, accessible and clear language in all spaces – including the political.

“Just informing them this is what this means in the community but at this level, this is what some of the language you use a lot or you’ll hear more often so that you’re able to understand,” Balenaveikau continued. “It’s also getting them educated because in order to make informed decisions, they’ll need to know (what things mean).”

“It’s not that you’re undermining them, but it’s just the language the people use are different on all levels. If you want to make them feel included and come into your space, then you have to do that.”

She also sees this challenge translate into the media landscape – especially when it comes to the weather due to the technical and infrequent nature of its reporting.

“Media is very important because it also plays a vital role in... sharing information (so with femLINKpacific’s) Women’s Weather Watch – it’s very different,” Balenaveikau stated. “The weather news, they’ll only report if there’s a major cyclone.”

“It has to be, like, a hurricane, like, for example, Cyclone Winston, they’ll report it.”

Without information, people are powerless. Thus, a huge part of Balenaveikau’s life is keeping informed on all her life’s decisions. For example, while it is a challenge balancing the weekly budget, she makes sure that she always has enough for formula.

“I would love to breastfeed but then because of my circumstances that happened when I had just given birth, my dad passed away, it sort of affected my hormones and stress and production of milk,” she explained. “If I don’t have (enough formula), I’ll have a screaming child.”

“Peace for me...is just having a sense or reassurance of security like my economic security, financial needs are met, my physical needs, my safety, do I feel safe. For me, I find that as peace because then with all that being met, then and only can I feel peace in my mind. (But) cost of living -who doesn’t have challenge with that? I’m a young woman leader who happens to be a mother, who happens to have two children.”

While times can be tough, putting strain and stress into every waking moment, Balenaveikau’s advice is to set goals to help guide yourself.

“The things that kept me going is... something that I’ve actually written down,” she laughed. “This is what I want to do and I want this and this’ and now that I’m at it, I can’t stop - I have to finish what I started.”

“So, that’s the thing that keeps me going. That I have to finish what I’ve started. But also good to keep at the back of their mind, like, if you don’t finish it or if you don’t meet it, that’s fine, it’s not the end of the world. What’s important is, like, to acknowledge you’ve worked hard and that you also can take a time out for yourself. It’s always good to celebrate those small achievements that you’ve had, the small successes and to just put your 100 percent focus at work and when you’re at home, 100 percent at home.”