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Here Are The Women (2017): Vilomena Koroi (/index.php/en/actions/here-are-the-women/494-here-are-the-women-2017-vilomena-koroi)



By Alisia Evans



“When you are not in the leadership role you don’t have much say.”

Vilomena Koroi, or Filo as she is also called, is 71 years old and the Senior Circuit Steward of the Dilkusha Methodist Women’s Fellowship in Nausori.

A leader for 50 women, Koroi also knows how important it is to foster the leadership skills of other women and so often supports them to be leaders in their own right.

“(We need) to encourage all the women ... not to give up and to continue with their income generation project for poultry, bakery, coconut virgin oil, and... backyard gardening, roti parcel selling,” highlighted Koroi. “We must encourage one another as women.”

The issue of income generation – or financial security – is vital to Koroi. In July 2016, before the release of the 2016–2017 National Budget announcement, she was gravely concerned with the

impact of the high cost of food on women in her communities.

“The prices of food items like sugar, rice, oil, flour and tin fish these are the things that we produce locally and should be reasonably priced,” Koroi stated emphatically. “But it’s high and before Winston we were complaining about the price, after Winston it got worse.”

“I’m sorry but the budget is not meeting my needs, my priority needs.”

The responsibility to look after the family and community is what defines women as dedicated hard workers, explained Koroi during femLINKpacific’s 3rd National Women’s Human Security First: Women’s Weather Watch consultation in October last year. However, this hard work is not so readily recognized and reflected at the national level.

“I’ve seen men who plough the land and even they’re given small businesses that are very successful, why, because they’re very devoted and dedicated workers.” Koroi clarified. “If (the women) are given land and other resources, I’m sure they’ll bring security to the whole family (as well).”

In addition to being senior circuit steward, she is also the manager of the Dilkusha Methodist High School. During the night of Severe Tropical Cyclone (TC) Winston, Koroi’s dedication to her responsibilities as manageress put her own safety and security at risk.

“To me, safety is having (a) safe, strong place to go to if there is a need for evacuation and our school is always the evacuation center,” explained Koroi, “But in that cyclone Winston... that’s what is worrying... I was almost blown away by the wind.”

“That’s (how) strong (it was).”

Since her experience on duty that night of TC Winston, she has continued the momentum and continued to highlight the recommendations that she believes in through femLINKpacific’s community media. The platform has also been an opportunity to learn, strengthening her understanding of preparedness and protection through attendance at the district, divisional and national consultations.

“I would like to see evacuation centres to be built stronger - in a higher safe location, different from the school buildings,” Koroi pointed out. “In the last cyclone, the tin and the verandah were blown away and our school is near the river and on low ground.”

No matter how much passion or information one may have, being a leader comes with its own share of difficulties. As manager of a high school, Koroi has had to find ways to ensure the protection and safety of students.

“I was in a very difficult situation where I had to look after these teenage girls in the high school.” explained Koroi. “We have our old scholars Association and PTA too and it’s really difficult because their parents are working and children go from school to an empty house.”

“The problem is that they’re all in scattered areas starting from Wainibokasi to Verata and Sawani back to Dilkusha back to Queens Road like Nakasi and that’s a wide area.”

However, knowing that she has the support of other women from her fellowship has enabled Koroi to meet with the mothers of her students and overcome the challenges of travelling across such a large geographical area. It also means that she has been able to identify those who need help and provides them with a hand up from the church food bank.

“I go individually to visit them and advise the mothers on what they should be doing because some of them have no knowledge at all,” Koroi described. “So, when we meet as Methodist Women’s Fellowship, we advise (the mothers) on what incidents has happened, how to protect them – that’s the only way in a women’s fellowship.”

Immediately after TC Winston, Koroi’s women’s fellowship demonstrated their resourcefulness when they responded to a call for assistance from a women’s fellowship member living in Rakiraki - communities were still not receiving emergency relief supplies 5 days after the cyclone.

“Women paid from their own pocket for relief and assistance,” shared Koroi. “From the women’s fellowship, we fundraised \$600 for food, for relief.”

Koroi’s explanation of their initiative to the other women leaders at femLINK’s July 2016 central divisional consultation, of how they have established their own disaster response funds, sparked discussions about how such innovations would support the work that other groups are doing on the ground.

Participating in our monthly rural network meetings has been a worthwhile investment for Koroi as she reflects on the challenges that women face in becoming leaders.

“I think the barriers are women are always shy and they lack confidence – in that case, I’m thankful to femLINK,” noted Koroi. “Here we learn how to speak in public, how to be confident and that’s what we (are) here for.”

“We are being trained to be confident in speaking to others, to lead others.”

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