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Here Are The Women – Pacific (2017): Anne Pakoa (/index.php/en/actions/here-are-the-women/540-here-are-the-women-pacific-2017-anne-pakoa)



by Sian Rolls



“Peace is... actually giving the accessibility and the able-ness to everyone - including women and children, those living with disability,” outlined the passionate Anne Pakoa from Vanautu, speaking to femLINKpacific during the Pacific Feminist Forum. “Good water, good education, good quality and good accessible education for all, also good roads – infrastructure

- and good marketing outlets where rural women can come in and sell their produce to be able to make some income for their families.”

“I believe that if a home, a household, has those basic necessities in life including basic health care facilities, family planning or contraceptives, I think someone can be... can live a comfortable life just having those basic necessities of life.”

As a nurse by training, Pakoa has been working in the areas of health, education and women's rights.

“My involvement in civil society was way back in my late teens, early graduation as a nurse by profession and then I took up education as an interest,” she shared in 2015. “I like analysing national policies but in terms of education.”

“So, my work has been with the grassroots, the politicians, the churches, the youth and I find myself now sitting and speaking on behalf of women and I like it.”

For the past seven years she has been coordinating the Vanuatu Education Policy Advocacy Coalition (VEPAC) and during that time has since formed Vanuatu Young Women for Change (VYW4C) as well as, in 2015, received the US Women of Courage Award.

“VYW4C wants to see that women must speak out, participate productively and pro-actively towards social development for a better nation,” said Pakoa.

Her partnership with femLINKpacific began soon after the category 5 tropical cyclone Pam ravaged Vanuatu in 2015.

As a first responder she provided Women's Weather Watch updates – in the midst of her work coordinating damage reports and leading assessment teams to record the most urgent requests, usually small things like tents, of people who live mostly outside a cash economy and have little buying power.

She raised not only the basic needs, but highlighted the underlying challenges, including that of communication.

“We have not heard from our families in the islands,” she reported at the time. “I can't reach my brother in the island, nor the chiefs.”

“One of our local women's group is on Tongoa Island for work purpose and I have not heard from them. I want to believe that they are okay. There is no radio, no television, no electricity. Our national radio station building roof is torn apart. Most people aren't able to charge their phones just yet therefore it is very hard for us to communicate with our friends and families especially those in the islands to see if they are okay. I have a team of youths who will be carrying out assessments in our local communities nearby.”

A go-getter fuelled by interest, love and dedication, things were not easy in Pakoa's early years.

“I got pregnant at 20 and (he) beat me,” she told Melinda Trochu of TV5 Monde. “He stabbed me in the head.”

“My brothers and my father managed to get me out of this horrible relationship. When my daughter was 14 months old, I had to leave the country to study abroad. It was very hard. It is to my family that I owe the person I am today.”

Her family not only saved her from a dire situation in a country where women are treated as objects – bought and sold through the practice of bride price – but place her within the unit as a woman with voice and power.

“When I heard about how women... sisters are privileged to share land with their brothers – it gives me an honour to say that I've been one of the very privileged women here,” she explained in 2015. “Out of my brothers, I was appointed by my dad to have his voice in the village and also my dad is one of the chiefs in the village.”

“I get to give the final words to my brothers to say whether they can distribute the land, they can sell it, they can do whatever with it. I have the last say and that's something that women in Vanuatu don't have and I'm privileged to that.”

But Pakoa does not rest on her laurels; she works actively to bring all women – especially young women – up to a place where everyone is equal, respected and protected.

“It is also our responsibility to also make sure that the legend (the work of feminists from the 70’s) grows through the voices and representations of our young girls,” she said. “I’ve seen my daughters grow up and my nieces and young girls in the communities.”

“Accessibility is okay in urban areas but it’s a challenge in the rural areas where young girls have to go very far, a lot of them have to cross mountains and cross rivers and they can walk for the whole day, even a day and a half to be able to reach the health care facility, and to me that is something we’re deprived of them of their rights to access basic health care (including basic contraceptives.”

While the work of VYW4C focuses on improving literacy and other service provision, Pakoa wants not just a change for today but a change to forever; this requires systematic change and a real commitment from leadership across all levels.

“Young women face a lot of challenges in terms of being jobless and, talking to a lot of young girls that have left school, they feel that they don’t have a space,” she elaborated. “A lot of them feel so frustrated that they tend to take the frustration out by abusing kava, alcohol, sex, cigarettes and marijuana.”

“(They need to) feel loved and feel protected, know that the basic needs such as health and education or family planning and food - that they could access it or that steps could be taken to ensure those securities are provided. Our community leaders should be held accountable and it’s everybody’s business to make sure that young girls should continue learning. But also... something also that would be good is be able to build the knowledge and capacity of young girls as to know their rights and be able to report to the police when there is violence. And what is violence? And they should be able to recognize when a situation becomes violent too, you know... and they should seek legal advice and be able to access justice.”

Doing this work, however, is getting fewer and fewer resources as the threat of climate change including disasters because more hazardous and as the politics of the word becomes increasingly more militarised.

“We cannot fight for our human brothers and sisters anymore because now countries are trying to sell weapons to affect us,” she underscored. “There are cyclones that are hitting us, left, right, centre - the tsunamis are rising, the waves are coming up from one side of the island to the end... destroying the houses, destroying the lives of those tiny fish under the water.”

“We (in the Pacific) are so privileged to enjoy a lot of our natural resources... we live in one of the most beautiful places in the world but yet we are not appreciative of some of the things that we have every day that other countries cannot see. These are things that we want to tell our leaders to say that when you are there on a parliamentary session and you start to talk about climate change, don’t talk about the things that will come to take away the cows and the powerlines, the things that will fall – talk about the things that will lessen the smiles of our people, will lessen the peace and security of our people.”

Now, more than ever, says Pakoa, there is a need to talk about the environment through a human security lens which means acting on the inter-linkages between environment, food and health security and women’s political security or status, with greater emphasis on preparedness strategies.

“We will have tsunamis, we will have other cyclones, will have earthquakes but preparedness of the people is very important,” she summed up. “How do we rebuild nations by rebuilding an individual?”

“We rebuild an individual by making sure that that individual is equipped with the basic knowledge that they have in order to prevent themselves and their families.”

*For more from femLINKpacific's series of 'Here Are The Women' profiles, visit:
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