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FemTALK: A Gendered Approach Makes Good Business, Sustainable Development (/index.php/en/actions/archive/582-femtalk-a-gendered-approach-makes-good-business-sustainable-development)

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by Hannah Hicks and Sian Rolls

“It all starts with valuing a role,” explained Leanne Hunter of J Hunter Pearls Fiji.

femLINKpacific caught up with Hunter in Savusavu last month (July) to find out more about the modality of work of J Hunter Pearls Fiji in engaging communities, especially women, in pearl farming in the Northern division.

Involving women said Hunter makes good business sense as well as ensuring sustainability in natural resource management:

“With women as the backbone in these rural communities, they know what they need (in their communities) already. It’s about talking to them and communicating it, not us going and (saying) ‘this is what you need to do to make your village better and make it run efficiently’ and ‘this is the model for business and you can generate this much and then returns’. We actually listen to them and they tell us and we provide the means for them to be able to do it. That’s always been our approach to working with communities from the grassroots level.”

What is also important, she says, is supporting women to recognise and reaffirm their leadership roles:

“In a traditional aspect, within the village, women don’t value the role of their natural role that they’re given within that community and they don’t value the worth of that role from a communal aspect. Once they do, that type of empowerment will lead them on to other things.”

In October this year, leaders of Pacific Island states and territories as well as private sector and civil society organisations are expected to converge at the 13th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women and 6th Meeting of the Pacific Ministers for Women in Fiji's capital.

For a solid week, those in attendance aim to unpack the realisation of women's economic empowerment across the region; a challenge all sectors, including the business community like J Hunter Pearls Fiji, are slowly chipping away at. According to Adi Vasulevu, femLINK's Northern Division convenor there is a valuable opportunity to learn from the J Hunter Pearls Fiji practice model which can support progressing commitments to women's economic empowerment. In her own work, she has enabled communities, including and especially women's groups and networks, to come together and realise their income generating programmes:

"Like (Leanne) said, they (the women) were the ones that told us, they are the ones that actually contributed to the model that you have now and what type of development do they want to take on to the village. Although, at the same time, they are building their economic security and they're part of the decision-making."

"I think that's also a long term model too," added Hunter. "You know you don't want instant responses to it or instant gratification from whatever you do."

Emphasising quality in a shifting economic system

Sustaining the economic activities is not just about ensuring that women learn the skills of pearl farming.

"It's a good lesson to also teach these communities that it's not so much about quantity but it's about quality," explained Hunter. "Through rarity and uniqueness... by applying the quota system to these farms, we then keep the level of production at where we want it to be that we are still unique."

Enabling a synergy between traditional economic systems and culture has also been at the heart of the J Hunter Pearls Fiji approach:

"It works within their traditional model anyway (and) what's especially important for us in that respect is that these jobs are not taking women out of the village - we're taking the spat collectors to the village so they still have their children around them, they can still do their traditional roles within the village at the same time they have an opportunity to benefit economically as well," she continued, adding that the communal approach to work and remuneration has also augured well for the villages they work in. "When you go into the villages and you take the work to them, one woman might not be available every day of the week from that time to that time. She might come for two days, another one might come for one day because they have their other responsibilities within the village. The money goes into a community fund, from there they allocate a little bit off to everyone but the larger percentage of that money goes towards projects that they've got listed down. That model actually works for them anyway to be able to put the money into a community fund and then they decide how it should be siphoned off and then how much to go to a project."

This approach adds Hunter is in sync with the communities:

"It's what they decided and traditionally that's how they work within the village anyway. We just facilitated that along the way. By taking the work to them... the model just formed as we grew and developed and then we found out that our model is feasible."

An enabling and pristine environment

It's no secret that an eyebrow is raised when the conversation about private sector investment comes up.

However, the value of relationship building was stressed by Hunter as a key approach to not just keep the flow of high quality products but to maintain the social and physical environment around them.

"It's not just taking off and running off by yourself but you know going with the community, empowering especially women," added Vasulevu. "It's also a long term process it cannot just happen today because what I'm hearing community have trust with your company because that's the only reason, the only way they stay working with you and that can happen in a long term relationship."

It just makes good business sense.

"Because pearl farming requires a pristine environment to work in, we find that a lot of the times where we set up, it's in real quite remote areas, they don't have many other opportunities for economic benefits," outlined Hunter. "When we go in

and we approach a women's group and say we can offer this to you... those women then say, 'well, look, we have this project already... in line with what we've been talking about for a long time' (It may be) amongst their church groups or it could be just a women's group or women's initiative. It becomes a way of being able to make this happen now and so that's how it really started for us with the first women's group."

The J Hunter model is demonstrated what is possible to value and support women including elevating women's handicraft production into the high end market which as Hunter says starts with valuing women's traditional knowledge and skills: "There needs to be a lot more done to pull up all the women's handicrafts. (If) men were making these same handicrafts, they'd be double the price but they're worth nothing. These mats (that women make) with such elaborate designs are worth nothing simply because women are making them and they don't value their own time. It's a natural product, sure, but three months of their work to make one beautiful round mat... someone needs to teach them the value of that, the rarity of that and the marketability of that."

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