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FemTALK89FM Turns 13!

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It all began with a shared vision following the events of May 2000 in Fiji to promote ‘women speaking to women for peace’. It linked Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action and UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 which was adopted on October 31 2000. The vision of the co-founders collective of femLINKpacific was to provide a media platform for women across the Pacific - starting in Fiji, which included radio, press and television programmes.

It included linkages and support from feminist media allies like FEMNET, ISIS Manila International and the ‘mothership’ - the International Women's Tribune Centre - and making connections with the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) at a global community radio conference in 2003 and discovering the ‘suitcase radio’ as the most appropriate equipment for the organisation to develop ‘Women's Weekend’ radio broadcasts in the capital, and more importantly, take radio out to women in rural communities.

In May, 2004, femLINKpacific launched Fiji and the Pacific's first mobile women's community radio station - a complete radio station with a 100 watt transmitter which began monthly ‘Women's Weekend’ radio broadcasts with a team of 5th Form volunteers from the St Joseph's Secondary School and NGO contributors to the broadcast schedule including the women's network of the Fiji Disabled People's Federation, ECREA and Fiji Media Watch.

“That broadcast hosted by student volunteers brought the diversity of Suva-based civil society together – human rights and disability activists, ecumenical groups and the Fiji Media Watch – they all became part of a monthly broadcast,” explained Sharon Bhagwan Rolls, Executive Producer-Director of femLINKpacific. “The difference we wanted to make was to bring radio programmes from rural women to the capital city.”

"To bridge the gap of information. And so we also identified a core team of correspondents from CSO networks interested in producing content as part of their field work. And we hosted our first 16 days of community radio campaign with our initial rural team and interested Suva based women and youth led organisations like KIDSLINK. One of our first correspondents was Adivasu Levu who today continues to work with femLINK as a convenor for the work we do on Vanua Levu and Rabi. In fact she was the person who catalysed the development and production of the Community Radio Times. It is about giving back and sharing from the interviews we document across Fiji back to the women leaders who share their voice and opinions."

"We needed to break the silence, so that's what we did," added Adi Vasulevu, convenor in the North for femLINK. "We created an enabling space where women's thoughts, voices and ideas mattered."

Between 2005 and 2010, the 'suitcase radio' became a women's caravan of news and information - travelling out to women from Rakiraki to Sigatoka, Labasa and Savusavu producing content with women and then broadcasting these in each centre.

In 2007, the project "Generation Next" project brought young women on the airwaves with the development of a model that has enabled young women to lead broadcasts, produce content and also develop and grow within the organisation.

"By 2011 we had trained a core group of Labasa based young women so that we could establish Fiji's first rural community radio station in Labasa," continued Bhagwan Rolls. "In that journey since then, I have often been asked about our audience."

"Our community radio approach when it comes to our audience is not like a commercial radio in order to attract advertisers. Our community radio platform is first for women in rural centres, outside of the capital to talk about their development and human security, peace and development priorities. Our target audience, the women, in rural communities are defining the content."

Today, FemTALK89FM continues to bring people, especially rural women, young women, women with disabilities and LGBT advocates and activists together in a safe space to share their views and opinions and the Suva radio station has expanded to run 24 hours with a 300 watt transmitter targetting an audience in the densely populated Suva-Nausori.

FemTALK89FM Labasa continues to be an important platform for the network in Vanua Levu and a mobile unit continues to travel out for rural broadcasts, including the most recent in April from the Nadi market – a continued collaboration with town councils that has remained since FemTALK89FM's early days.

Things have come a long way but the technology is still the 'suitcase radio'.

FemTALK89FM is about community empowerment; it is about taking radio to women in their local communities; it is about enabling women and young women to have a voice share an opinion about a range of social, economic and political issues that will help bring about sustainable development and peace – including throughout the disaster cycle.

As our Women's Weather Watch campaign has illustrated, there is still a long way to go for women to be meaningfully engaged in decision making – at the detriment of resilience.

At the same time, through the 2 way communication facilitated by the community media process, rural women leaders are empowered as first responders to mobilise their communities.

"Each broadcast is an opportunity to promote the potential that exists within women leaders in local communities to identify critical development priorities as well as advise development programmes," explained Bhagwan Rolls. "The women who participate in each broadcast are supported to freely to express their opinion and belief. To communicate a culture of peace."

“The radio broadcasts, are an opportunity of the women to be heard by local leaders from those in local government to the leadership of district and provincial councils, who remain predominantly men. During the broadcasts in the capital city, the broadcast of these interviews, also reaffirm the need for national decision making to be inclusive of rural women’s realities.”

FemTALK89FM broadcasts 24 hours in Suva and from 10am to 2pm on weekdays in Labasa. For podcasted programmes, go to: <https://soundcloud.com/femlinkpacific> (<https://soundcloud.com/femlinkpacific>)

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