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# Here Are The Women – Pacific (2017): Vanessa Heleta (/index.php/en/actions/here-are-the- women/535-here-are-the-women-pacific- 2017-vanessa-heleta)



by *Sulueti Waqa*



“I really believe in educating young people, particularly young women, to think independently for themselves and to instill the belief in them that they have a paramount fundamental human right to participate in political and decision making processes,” shared Vanessa Heleta, Director of the Tonga based Talitha Project which she has established and nurtured since 2009 with the mission of addressing and preventing violence against women and girls.

Media is key for this passionate human rights activist and the gender focal point of Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) Pacific in Tonga.

It has been a way to discuss peace and human security issues in Tonga using a range of media information communication technologies (ICTs) in her work as she highlighted at the recent ‘Women, Peace and Security and the Humanitarian Agenda: Participation, Preparedness and Protection’ regional consultation

(April 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>) convened by femLINKpacific as the GPPAC Pacific regional secretariat.

In collaboration with Digicel Tonga, a series of messages went out to young girls in Tonga to promote protection and to simply be careful.

“We try to make it as simple as possible for everyone to understand especially the youth,” explained Heleta.

Since her time as an active participant in femLINK’s regional network, previously as a media correspondent representing Ma’a Fafine mo e Famili from 2006, she has seen not just the opportunities offered by ICTs, but the challenges as well.

“It’s very important to teach young women and girls to use (social media) wisely,” Heleta explained referring to the increasing issue of cyber bullying.

As she highlighted in Pasifika Peace Talanoa session, also organised by GPPAC Pacific and femLINKpacific in 2015, their work collaboratively with other women’s groups and the wider movement, as well as women leaders and candidates, in trying to get Tonga ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) by using their mainstream media to share their message even though it has been a controversial issue.

“We have a Tongan women’s coalition that we work very closely with (on issues like CEDAW),” she added during last week’s interactive dialogue. “We may not always see things eye to eye but we as women can come together on a particular issue and that is powerful.”

“When we collectively put together our expertise, intellect, ideas, experiences and passions only then the movement will be effective.”

This collaboration has been somewhat successful but the issue of sustainability is still a threat to the progress made so far.

“Gender equality is now on (Tonga’s) development agenda but there is still a long way to go,” she continued, adding that there was a need to support the small but core group of active civil society was also a challenge with aging active women leaders. “There’s only a handful of us at the frontline with all the women behind us.”

This is precisely why the Talitha Project is working to bridge the gap through the empowerment of young women including through the use of technology – responding to the need for more training and empowerment programs to upskill women to take leadership.

But one of the biggest barriers are the social norms that women have to break through.

“There is a fear that we should not break the ‘social norms’ which is the need to ‘fit in’,” she said.

As Heleta continues her work in Tonga and the Pacific, she hopes that the use of a human security framework among young women in particular will bring about peace for all.

“To me, peace and human security go hand in hand - we can only achieve peace when there is an effective human security in place,” she reflected. “I want to see the next generation of young women become champions.”