PC4D: A Pacific Perspective

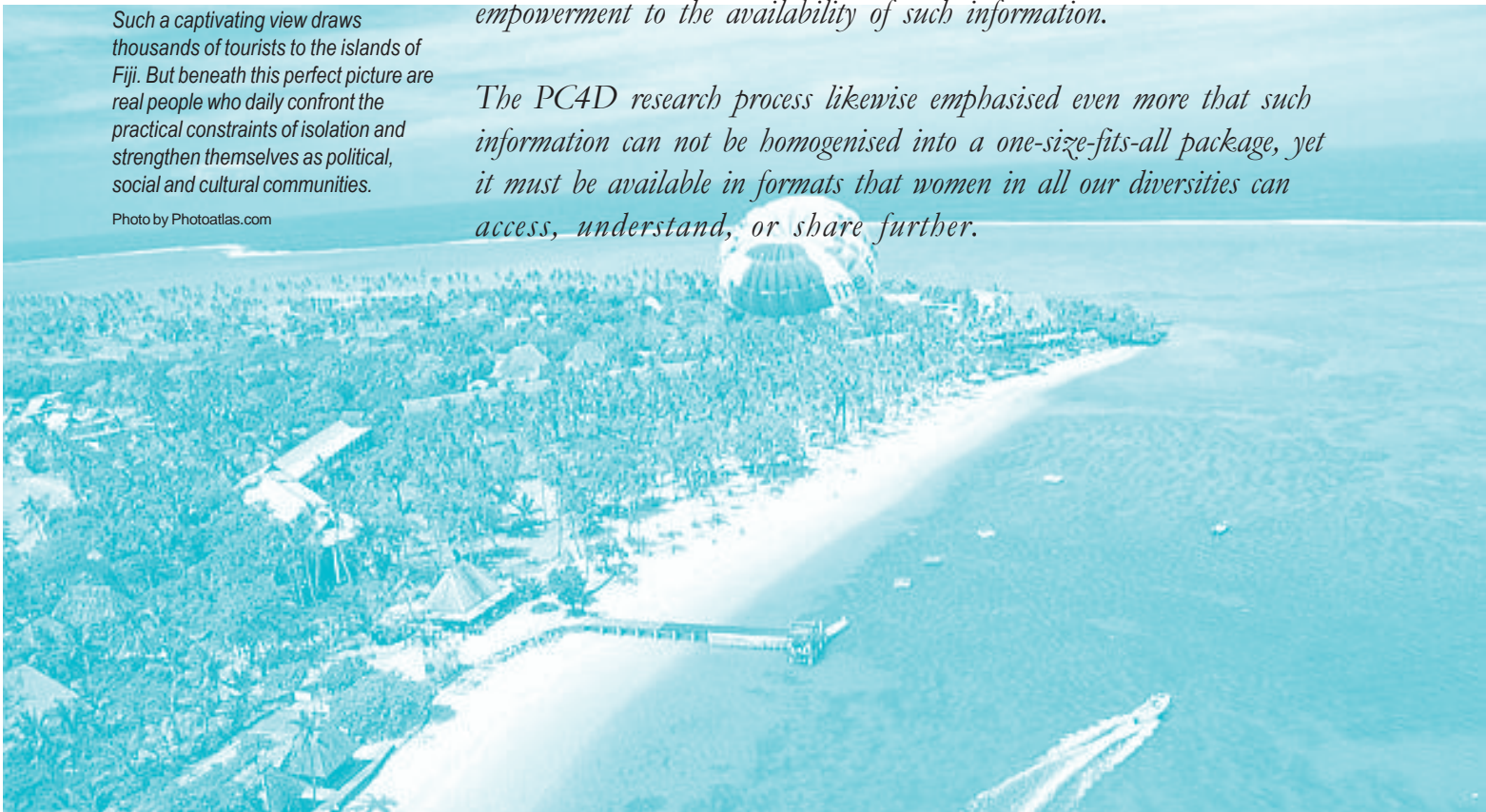**by Sharon Bhagwan Rolls**

For femLINKPACIFIC, participating in the research project was an opportunity to delve into the realities of why "we do the work we do." Not only was the research project a critical way to identify the most appropriate means of information and communication in supporting the empowerment of rural communities. It was also an opportunity to generate greater discussion of the existing gender power relations when it comes to information and communication.

While "we do the work we do," we have also realised the need for a broader public as well as feminist discussion on the ability of rural women to access information and the links of a woman's personal empowerment to the availability of such information.

The PC4D research process likewise emphasised even more that such information can not be homogenised into a one-size-fits-all package, yet it must be available in formats that women in all our diversities can access, understand, or share further.

Such a captivating view draws thousands of tourists to the islands of Fiji. But beneath this perfect picture are real people who daily confront the practical constraints of isolation and strengthen themselves as political, social and cultural communities.

Photo by Photoatlas.com

Gender and ICT in the Pacific

femLINKPACIFIC appreciates PC4D for the importance it gave to the Pacific island region, with the participation of the HELP Centre in Papua New Guinea. Despite the use of the term "the global village" in relation to the internet, Pacific realities, especially Pacific women's realities when addressing information and communication have remained marginalised for too long.

The research helped validate that there is almost nothing about women in relation to technology, especially in the context of the Pacific, where in recent years, there has been a development of the Pacific Digital Strategy. What this also means is that decisions are being made about the information and communications technology (ICT) sector without substantive gender analysis. What is of particular concern is that those working in the research field do not seem to be interested in working with grassroots women.

femLINKPACIFIC is a Fiji-based women's non-profit community media organisation that exists to empower women and communities by giving them a voice to fully participate in decision-making spaces for equality, development and peace. Strategies employed by the organisation are two-fold. Direct interventions employed for its beneficiaries (all women in Fiji, with a particular emphasis on young women, women with disabilities, and women who are 'under-served') include the development, production and distribution of appropriate media and communication materials. femLINKPACIFIC also works in collaboration with civil society organisations, mainstream media, and relevant government agencies under its policy advocacy component where it lobbies for gender policies and planning.

femLINKPACIFIC was born out of the Peace Vigil, following the civil coup in May 2000, and was formally established in September 2000. The focus of its range of community media initiatives is "women speaking to women for peace." It was inspired by the women who have led the way in Fiji's women's movement and motivated by Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action (Women and Media) and was further strengthened by the unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, titled Women, Peace and Security.

Underlying these issues is the need to give due consideration to infrastructure issues when planning developments relating to new ICTs, ensuring that communities are able to contribute to local content development and production.

The review of related literature indeed revealed that Pacific women, or even the gendered aspects of ICTs, are not being included in current research on communications particularly those dealing with ICTs.

Whatever research on new ICTs was available tended to be limited to the kinds of jobs that are being generated by technology. They focused on how many computers there are per capita or how many people use the internet. However, nothing is heard about communities or non-government organisations or grassroots people's organisations and their use of technology. These reports are also silent on television and newspapers or the other modes of communicating as though everything else has stopped.

So while the global point of view highlights that new ICTs seemed to be the priority area, PC4D fleshed out the applicability of these new ICTs to actual daily experiences of grassroots women.

So much emphasis in our region has been given to debating internet connectivity and the establishment of computer access points. But too often these strategies fail to ask the question: "Do these communities want these new ICTs? Do they want to use the computer or the internet? What is effective on the ground?" The Pacific perspective of PC4D has reiterated the effectiveness of

HELP Resources Inc.

The Health, Education, Sustainable Livelihood and Participation (HELP) for all Resources Inc.,is a local intermediary group with a focus on rural and grassroots communities and with networks throughout Papua New Guinea, the Pacific Region, and other countries. Its Multi-Purpose Community Telecentre houses a central library with print, video, audio, and CD-based information resources. HELP also supports and facilitates public access to new ICTs. It also offers training in the form of interactive community dialogue, theatre, and song as well as organisation or community-based participatory workshops in both English and Tok Pisin. HELP Resource Centre also produces publications that serve as important reference materials for the core learning programmemes in rural and grassroots communities.

Of all the five countries studied in PC4D, only Fiji noted a strong reading culture that makes print media an accessible, effective and empowering tool for women. Fiji Times is among the oldest mainstream English newspapers.

what is often called traditional tools and yet people only talk about new ICTs these days.

So the research has helped draw together what community and women's media advocates have been saying for a long time—that ICT development should not just be focused on the technology-determined kind of development but that ICT needs to be more people-centered. For as people, we are all still communicating the way people have b e e n communicating years, decades, centuries ago – that is talking directly to each other through radio, theatre, street plays, conversations and that is what works!

Pacific Women's Choice of Communications

As the research process began, we found it critical not to classify communication tools as "new" and "old" technologies, but view them broadly. Hence we took into account traditional means of communication

such as theatre and face-to-face discussion alongside newer tools such as radio and television, and even newer ICTs such as cellular phones and computers.

In general, intermediary groups in Fiji viewed oral communication as most empowering for grassroots women. The key in empowering grassroots women was "to go and sit down with them." Print media was also cited, given its accessibility and suitability to Fiji's reading culture, along with radio due to its reach and popularity among women. Theatre and performing arts and film were also considered empowering while television and telecommunications were not.

As Joan Yee, librarian of the University of the Pacific pointed out, "It is heartening that print media in the form of books, newsletters, posters, and brochures were rated quite highly in PNG and Fiji. One must never forget the usefulness of the print media, as long as large segments of our population are denied the benefits of electricity. And even when we do have electricity and access to the modern gadgets, the joy and satisfaction of reading is an activity that is treasured by many of us."

Intermediary groups in Fiji believed that new ICTs, particularly the internet, could be potentially empowering for grassroots women. However, new ICTs are largely inaccessible given infrastructure problems. Using the cellular phone likewise poses limitations. At the moment, only intermediary groups find new ICTs empowering for their own use. As such, traditional communication tools are more empowering for grassroots women.

A similar finding was made in Papua New Guinea, where both intermediary

groups and grassroots women are concerned with peace efforts in the country especially in Bougainville.

Many feminist groups also viewed empowerment as deeply connected to peace-keeping, as PNG's women are also heavily affected by the violence inflicted on them and their families by the conflict in Bougainville. Many groups, like Kup Women for Peace, also see the interconnections among HIV/AIDS, violence and wars. Intermediary groups and grassroots women are likewise concerned about violence against women like gang rapes brought about by *raskolism* are common and there are heavy cultural barriers against reporting these crimes to the authorities. In these situations, women's groups take on the role of mediator, counselor, and sometimes, legal aid and law enforcer.

Lessons Learned

The PC4D research process indeed allowed us to reflect on the "work we do" and how we must do it. No technology can replace oral, face- to-face communications, which grassroots women in the Pacific and beyond have found the most empowering.

"This shows that the personal and human touch still overrides everything and is something that we cannot ignore, despite the prevalence and power of new technologies," noted Yee, who was the guest speaker during the Pacific launch.

Yee also cited that the study provides many examples of the lengths and trouble that our women go through so that they can be in contact with the world and how the new technologies are helping. One such example is the case of Rosalia who lives in a remote area in Labasa. Rosalia takes in her stride the task of riding out on horse-back to a certain point so that she has reception for her mobile phone to receive or give messages.

Radio was identified as the most accessible communications tool for grassroots women in four of the countries studied and the reasons included: ability to reach rural areas, linguistic flexibility as vernacular languages can be used, the non-issue of literacy, low cost, and its non-dependence on electricity, among others. The technology is also simple and provides interaction with the popular "talkback" sessions. People can listen to radio simultaneously while they are carrying on their normal work or household activities.

The study verified that while the internet and email, computers, and mobile phones have much to offer, these were the least accessible to our ordinary women. "Some of this 'technology deprivation' may be explained by the absence of the necessary infrastructure such as electricity and networks (especially in rural areas), but also because of the low levels of technological literacy among the population, the high costs of the new technology and the depths of poverty amongst our peoples," said Yee.

She also noted that a recently published survey on household income and expenditure in Fiji indicated that computers were to be found only in the

Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls, coordinator of femLINKPACIFIC records the stories of rural women.

Photo from femLINKPACIFIC

The way forward now for the PC4D campaign is to ensure a more "women-centered" approach to information and communication, with a focus on developing "community-centered" information and media forms.

centered" information and media forms, as the study points to the need to advocate and lobby for reform of the ICT sector, including its regulatory environment.

The study has put forward practical recommendations to policy makers, state, donors, and other development actors and agencies; and social movements, feminist networks, and intermediary groups.

For the Pacific Island region, it is important for us to maintain the partnership with Isis International so that we can collectively engage with key national governments as well as regional actors who have a stake and influence in the implementation of the Pacific Digital Strategy, in particular the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

These are the agencies responsible for ensuring people-centered development, and therefore they also must be reminded of the urgent need to return to the fundamental principle behind gender and communications advocacy and develop and implement strategies that will give something back to the people by listening to what the people are saying: "New ICTs are great but the traditional forms of communication are still the ones we are using to communicate with each other directly and with our immediate concerns, our everyday concerns."

The next stage will also be about building a PC4D movement because we will not just be talking about the tools of communication but the politics and policies related to access, especially for women and persons with disabilities.

Overall, the research findings and campaign has the potential to be a catalyst for powerful change. ∎

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households of 30 per cent of the people in the country.

PC4D Campaign: The Way Forward

But when all is said and done, PC4D highlights that there is a serious information and digital divide that exists in most of our societies, in particular between the urban and rural areas, men and women, young and old, the disabled and those who do not suffer from any disabilities. To address the 'gender digital divide,' womens' groups including the Ministry of Women, must be directly involved in the related national policy-making areas.

For instance, part of the government's granting of telecommunications licenses could be the requirement that there must be extensive coverage of rural areas at prices that the rural poor can afford. Rural education programmes could also be required to ensure greater information literacy among rural women.

And so the way forward now for the PC4D campaign is to ensure a more "women-centered" approach to information and communication, with a focus on developing "community-