Inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum Launches Charter for Change

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Feminists, women human rights defenders and gender equality advocates celebrate the launch of the Pacific Feminists Charter for Change at the Forum in November 2016. Photo: Shazia Usman, Pacific Women Support Unit.

Herstoric, empowering, informative, educational, powerful, movement-building, sisterhood, celebration, diverse, colourful, joyous, solidarity – were some of the words used by a hundred or so feminists, women human rights defenders and gender equality advocates to describe the inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum.

Held from 28-30 November 2016, during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence, at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, the Forum was a dream come true for lead organiser, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM). For many years, FWRM had envisioned hosting a feminist forum in the Pacific, similar to the ones organised by global feminist movements such as the Asia Pacific Feminist Forum and the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) Forum. FWRM's dream was supported by a Steering Group made up of representatives from diverse feminist groups and organisations*, as well as the Pacific Women Support Unit, DFAT and other funding partners.

"It's been a historic moment bringing over a hundred feminists from Fiji and 12 other Pacific Island countries together, to a space of vibrant discussions where we're able to talk about issues that we face in the Pacific. And it's only fitting that we were able to host an event such as this to also mark FWRM's 30th birthday," said Ms Michelle Reddy, Acting Executive Director of FWRM at the time.

With the theme Mapping Journeys, Building Forums, the Forum had around 20 sessions, including a combination of open plenary and multiple thematic sessions. The high level of interest in the Forum saw thematic sessions scheduled simultaneously over the three days, giving participants an option to select based on interest. Topics included: climate change and mining; coalition building; sexual and reproductive health and rights; feminist and intergenerational leadership; resourcing and funding for women's right's work; feminist research; intersectional feminism; issues affecting young women and girls, rural women and women with disabilities; rights of lesbian, bisexual and trans women; gender and humanitarian action and the role of communications, activism and women's rights in the Pacific. These were selected by the Steering Group based on the relevance of topics and quality of applications received from across the Pacific. The interactive thematic sessions were complemented by evening events, including an evening of spoken word poetry where participants had an opportunity to showcase their creative side.

Pacific Women hosted a session on the first day of the Forum entitled Pacific Women Talanoa: What is Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development? The space gave participants an opportunity to ask questions about the program and share their thoughts on how it can better support the work of Pacific feminists. The program was represented by Ms Yoshiko Yamaguchi, Pacific Women Advisory Board member; Ms Suzanne Bent, First Secretary, Gender Equality, Australian High Commission (Fiji); Ms Linda Petersen, Pacific Women Support Unit Team Leader and Ms Filomena Tuivanualevu, one of Pacific Women's consultants developing a roadmap to guide the program's future investments. The session was facilitated by Ms Tara Chetty, Pacific Women Support Unit's Senior Program Officer – Gender.

Reflecting on the overall Forum, Ms Jennifer Wate, Program Manager with the West 'Are'Are Rokotanikeni Association in Solomon Islands, said the three-days of discussions "broadened [her] knowledge and understanding on the diversity of the women's movement in the Pacific", adding that "it was an opportunity for people like me and my organisation to look into what are some possibilities to engage with other women's groups in the future".

For Ms Wendy Bai Magea, a Research Assistant in digital ethnography with the Centre for Social and Creative Media, University of Goroka, Papua New Guinea, this was only the second time for her to attend a regional forum. She found the experience to be "eye-opening".

"My work involves documenting how people experience the digital world. My big project is on mobile phones, so right now I am documenting the history of mobile phone use in Goroka. My favourite session at the Forum was on the important role of communications as that's my area of interest. At the Forum I learned that feminism is very broad and everyone's perception of it is different and I respect that," said the young professional.

For Ms Walewene Jeannette, a member of the Union des Femmes Francophones d'Océanie (Alliance of Pacific French Speaking Women) New Caledonia, the Forum was a place where she learned more about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as different experiences of women from urban and rural areas.

"[Homosexuality] is not easily accepted in remote areas [where I come from] – some accept it and some don't. But it was good for us to learn more and see how the community does networking – with others and between themselves as a feminist movement".

The Forum culminated in the launch of the Pacific Feminists Charter for Change, a document recognising the lived experiences of Pacific women and reflecting the issues raised during the three days of discussions. A highlight of the Charter drafting and endorsement process was the negotiation and inclusion of progressive language on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. While religion and culture is often cited as reasons to delay progress on these rights, Pacific women attending the Forum found that faith and feminism can fit well together. A copy of the Charter can be accessed here on FWRM's website.

*The Pacific Feminist Forum Steering Group included: FWRM, Diverse Voices and Action for Equality Fiji, Haus of Khameleon, Bold Alliance and the Pacific Young Women's Leadership Alliance.