

Changing market culture in the Pacific: Assembling a conceptual framework from diverse knowledge and experiences

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Abstract: *Addressing the multiple dimensions of gender inequality requires commitments by policy-makers, practitioners and scholars to transformative practices. One challenge is to assemble a coherent conceptual framework from diverse knowledges and experiences. In this paper, we present a framework that emerged from our involvement in changing market culture in the Pacific, which we name a radical empowerment of women approach. We draw on detailed narratives from women market vendors and women-led new initiatives in marketplaces to explain this approach. We argue that the primary focus of recently developed projects for marketplaces in the Pacific is technical and infrastructural, which is insufficient for addressing gendered political and economic causes of poor market management and oppressive conditions for women vendors. By exploring the complex array of motives and effects of the desire to transform or improve marketplaces in the Pacific, we caution against simplistic technical or infrastructural solutions. This paper also introduces the practice of working as a cooperative, hybrid research collaboration. The knowledges and analyses that we bring to this issue demonstrate that substantive analysis generated from diverse and shifting ‘locations’ and roles, but underpinned by a shared vision of, and commitment to, gender justice, can provide distinctive policy and research insights.*

Keywords: *empowerment of women, gender equality, market vendors, marketplaces, Pacific development, research collaboration*

Introduction

Addressing the multiple dimensions of gender inequality in the Pacific, as elsewhere, requires a commitment from policy-makers, practitioners and scholars in the development community to transformative practices. A challenging part of any transformative practice is assembling a coherent conceptual framework from the diverse knowledge and experiences of various actors, including the women directly involved. In this paper, we present a framework which emerged as we were variously involved in changing market culture in the Pacific. We named this framework a radical empowerment of women approach. This was in response to the remark of a consultant who was working on a

market ‘improvement’ project aimed at developing more democratic and inclusive market vendors’ associations. The remark came after a query about rural, producer-selling, small-scale women traders becoming full voting members and leaders, in proportional representation, to market vendors’ associations, most of which are exclusively dominated by men who are large stall holders and business operators. The consultant’s response to this proposition was ‘isn’t that a bit radical?’ Our radical empowerment of women approach counters this questioning and recognises the need to challenge existing practice and thinking about market culture.

Women have a dominant presence in marketplaces in the Pacific, both as vendors and buyers. Yet there have been few attempts to

recognise gender, ethnic and economic differences among vendors, and this has led to marketplaces becoming increasingly insecure, exploitative and dangerous places. In spite of their pivotal place in the market chain, many women producer-sellers are exploited and vulnerable. Gender-based violence is prevalent in many marketplaces, with women and children especially vulnerable to violence when they reside in the marketplaces overnight and sometimes for days on end until they can sell their produce and/or return to their village. There is often a lack of adequate security, and sometimes security personnel are involved in perpetrating or ignoring the violence enacted against vendors and patrons. This violence is of course not limited to the marketplace. Exploitative economic practices also abound, with unofficial charges for such things as toilet use and security and overnight 'accommodation' on the floor of the marketplace being charged on top of official fees. These charges are largely unrestricted and unregulated, and detract from vendors' livelihoods. Facilities are often drastically inadequate, in some places a little more than the shelter that women themselves erect with poor or no sanitation. While marketplaces are also busy, vibrant and vital places, and are central to food supply networks and livelihoods, women vendors also experience various forms of insecurity and exploitation.

Based on our knowledge of market vendors in the Pacific, we propose a fresh and radically new approach to considering women's empowerment in marketplace development projects: fresh because it takes seriously the ability of groups of women to govern their own political and economic lives; and radical because an explicit focus on empowering organisations of women working for their livelihood in Pacific marketplaces has slipped away from many development policy-makers and practitioners who focus solely on infrastructure development and financial inclusion (Banthia *et al.*, 2013). While infrastructural and financial inclusion projects have their place, they are insufficient for addressing the unequal power relations that negatively impact on multiple aspects of women's lives. We argue that to deal with the enduring nature of gender inequality requires a more radical approach to empowerment (Batliwala, 2007; Kabear, 2010),

especially in places which matter to marginalised and impoverished women, hence the focus on marketplaces.

In August 2012, Pacific Island Leaders signed the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (annex 1 of the 43rd Communique of the Pacific Island Forum Meeting). Witnessed by global guests including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Executive Director of UN Women Michelle Bachelet (in 2014 elected President of Chile), this high-level commitment to gender equality in the Pacific was unprecedented. Sceptics rightfully questioned whether this was an 'empty commitment or a real opportunity' (Mackesy-Buckley, 2012), but financed by significant funds from the Australian and New Zealand governments, new infrastructure development in key urban markets in the Pacific started in 2012 (UN Women, 2012). Many of these efforts are characterised by limited gender analysis and thus, we argue, will fall short of empowering women. Our concern was the failure to expose and redress inequality and injustice, which is embedded in the social, political and economic status quo and the inevitable layers of structural and sexual violence that, in many places in the Pacific, dominate women's engagement in and reliance on marketplace activity.

To counter these shortcomings and because of the urgency of need for change in marketplaces, we argue for a radical new approach to the empowerment of women which highlights two critical but often overlooked features. The first is that women need to be recognised as astute political subjects making decisions based on complex and diverse bodies of knowledge, often while they are in marginalised, insecure and unsafe situations. Such knowledge is very evident for women market vendors in the Pacific who know many things, such as the timing of crop planting and harvesting and how best to transport, refresh and display produce. They are knowledgeable about who is best suited to plant, harvest, cook and/or distribute produce, as well as how current relationships, networks and opportunities are affected by past connections, alliances and conflicts. Women market vendors, like so many other women, are often also coping with unpredictable and often violent events in their community, family and personal lives.

The second feature is that women need to be recognised for their diverse economic practices, that is, the diverse ways in which they contribute to the economy (see Gibson-Graham, 2008). This allows them to, for example, finance family health and education, and improvements in living conditions like purchasing lamps, mattresses, mosquito nets, and pots and pans. Women's economic contributions support households and community institutions, through customary gifting and feasting, sponsorship of religious and sporting events, school fees and community fundraising for the building and maintenance of schools, clinics and churches. Rural local governments and large urban municipalities, and wider regional economies, are also supported by the income women earn from 'marketing', through the taxes generated and fees imposed at various points along the supply chain, including in the marketplaces themselves.

In this paper, we pay particular attention to women market vendors and their struggles for empowerment, arguing for their recognition as active and productive income earners, as well as key political agents. For this to happen, democratic and inclusive market vendors' associations are essential. Women must be permitted active membership and leadership opportunities so that they can influence market governance and gain entry into formal local level governance (see Meagher, 2014). This approach also draws attention to other ways in which women's empowerment can be 'radically' advanced, such as through the development of supply chains and alternative forms of credit and insurance.

This paper emerges from a commitment to build cooperative, hybrid research collaborations in development. Existing conceptualisations of collaboration in development research do not capture the full suite of arrangements between differently situated people involved in development (Aniekwe *et al.*, 2012). Cave *et al.* (2012: 39) argue for the need for social science scholars to work across university–community boundaries and in doing this, to 'bring our location, networks and knowledge together with others in a critical collaborative manner'. In this case, the research collaboration that underpins this paper came about through a shared goal of developing an analysis of a contemporary

development project unfolding throughout the Pacific, the upgrading of marketplace infrastructures in the name of women's safety and economic empowerment. We realised that together, our different experiences and engagement in the broad concern for decent and enabling workplaces and gender equality converged in a shared conceptual framework. This framework challenged dominant thinking, and congealed around a social justice and social change approach, by focusing on how to ensure that women market vendors in the Pacific were 'radically' empowered.

Each of us drew on our own research and experience working with women market vendors in the Pacific to develop a guiding conceptual framework – the radical empowerment of women. For one of us, this was over three decades of work; for others, it was more recent. We met in various pairs, at various times, and we lived in different parts of the Pacific over the time we were working around markets. This made face-to-face meetings for all four of us impossible. None of us were able to make the same intense commitment to writing at the same time because we were all variously involved in other livelihood activities. Nevertheless, we committed to demonstrating another form of hybrid research collaboration – a Pacific feminist action writing collaboration – because we felt equally strongly about the importance of presenting an alternative reading of the mainstream analysis of marketplace development in the Pacific and the possibilities offered when women's rights are placed at the centre, an approach that others still regarded as 'radical'.

As collaborating authors and researchers, we have a combined, long-term experience of working variously in the development 'sector', as market-going citizens, residents and neighbours of urban and rural communities in the Pacific; as members and as leaders of community-based and local and international non-government organisations (NGOs); as scholars, researchers, consultants, activists and development professionals. The knowledge and analysis that we bring to the issue of changing market culture in the Pacific demonstrate that substantive analysis generated by women from diverse and shifting 'locations' and roles, who share a common vision of and commitment to gender justice, can provide distinctive policy

and research insights. Our continued conversations and collaboration in scoping, researching, analysing and planning for better markets have been crucial for a coherent conceptual framework to emerge, one that captures the diversity of our experience and analysis, and enables ongoing intellectual agility. Moreover, compromise, patience and trust have been, and are integral to our research and writing processes. In writing this paper, for example, we have struggled to combine narrative and other methodologies of data gathering, analysis and presentation that satisfy our various approaches to development research, policy and practice, as well as the communities we belong to and represent. We are engaged in a long-term exchange that builds on our continued engagement with market vendors and managers in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, and to a lesser extent in the Cook Islands and Samoa, and our commitment to honing a participatory and collective concept.

A radical approach to gender justice in the Pacific takes an explicitly critical feminist approach. This means committing to transforming the structures and processes that contribute to entrenched gender inequalities. This requires a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of women's lives, which is usefully gained by being part of Pacific communities over a significant period of time. Second, we recognise the multiple subject positions of our women friends and kin and our colleagues, whose lives in the Pacific we are part of. We work alongside them and with them because 'at the end of the day, it is those on the ground who will lead successful projects' (Cox and Underhill-Sem, 2011: 303).

In this paper, we first briefly describe the general situation facing women in marketplaces in the Pacific. We then provide examples of how women have been variously involved in marketplaces in the Pacific, focusing on Fiji and Solomon Islands. We also briefly introduce innovative new practices in market governance in Vanuatu and the Highlands of PNG. The Fiji stories demonstrate how two very different women market vendors fit into the historical development of markets in Fiji. One is a market vendor involved in four decades of struggle for market women's rights and representation, who heads the local vendors union; and the other

whose story of activism is a more recent one of overcoming the marginalisation and disempowerment in a huge city market, and committing to give many different groups of vendors voice. We also examine the challenges of implementing a transformative governance programme and developing infrastructure that enables and enhances women's empowerment at the Honiara Central Market.

Why the focus on women in marketplaces in the Pacific?

From a practical perspective, women market vendors and leaders are critical to the transformation of marketplaces in the Pacific. Yet their absence as key players is notable in recent development initiatives that prioritise upgrading physical infrastructure, where women vendors are largely excluded from planning and decision-making on infrastructure design (see e.g. UN Women, 2012). New initiatives focusing on women and markets have gained increasing legitimacy among development actors and the general public as people can see, for example, new signage, new buildings and new media attention. Despite a shared 'will to improve' (Murray Li, 2007) among stakeholders and significant engagement in marketplace 'improvement' projects, key initiatives have not, however, included a rigorous process for analysing and responding to women's infrastructure priorities and constraints, and women market vendors, especially the poorest, remain peripheral to market improvement programmes. The processes by which these new initiatives came about, including the lack of consultation and abrupt removal of long-standing market places, are very quickly overlooked.

Since 2012, both the Australian and New Zealand governments have committed significant resources to support the upgrade of the largest markets in the Pacific, most recently NZD7million in April 2014 for Gordon's market in Port Moresby, PNG (UN Women, 2014). Capital-intensive projects are intended to revamp degraded physical facilities which, despite significant flows of money generated in and by marketplaces, have had little investment. A radical empowerment of women approach would require all market development initiatives to explicitly prioritise a process by which

women market vendors form organisations to represent their interests and reflect their priorities in market planning and development. This would also enable them to participate in other processes like research and project evaluation, to ensure a democratic and transparent system of market management and governance. As we demonstrate, not only are there precedents for this in the Pacific, but also there is willingness by women to learn and to organise.

It is difficult to deny the need to improve the physical infrastructure of urban markets of the Pacific, many of which were built in colonial days with little reference to indigenous aesthetics, environmental needs and constraints, or vendors' dignity, reality and needs. Increasingly, grand new structures that can accommodate up to 2000 vendors have been built (Mt Hagen, Kundiawa, Kokopo, Alotau and Wewak in PNG; Auki in Solomon Islands; and Nausori in Fiji), but it is not evident that such new marketplaces were built with women vendors' input in the new location, architecture, space engineering, transport links and amenity decisions. A new focus on marketplace infrastructure projects puts into place spatial arrangements based on 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1995). Through these regimes, women vendors can be more easily and efficiently controlled and taxed; they might be required to trade from demarcated (painted and numbered) allocated sections on counters or tables, or operate in similarly subdivided spaces on the ground or footpath to display and sell their produce. More intangible but pervasive is the notion that local people cannot themselves plan, finance or participate in the management and maintenance of large-scale capital works, like marketplaces. As this 'truth' circulates and builds momentum, the complex gendered reasons why most marketplaces decline and deteriorate get lost. Instead, technical interventions are made and the structural causes of poor governance and covert discrimination, marginalisation and exploitation are overlooked.

As Murray Li (2007: 122) correctly argues, when technical interventions fail, and problems return, there is a heightened need expressed by major donors for more intervention. These new interventions, however, require behaviour to be modified so that people comply with the self-imposed mandates of local and national gov-

ernments, and development agencies. This often justifies misguided and discriminatory heavy-handed tactics by guards, some official and some self-appointed, because, in some places for instance, they claim to be the original owners of the land on which the markets stand. In such processes, the complex and dynamic political and economic lives of women market vendors are at stake. While there is a need to ensure women's unequivocal rights to safe, secure and decent workplaces and livelihoods, it is also essential that interventions recognise and establish processes to ensure women retain their freedom to be economic and social agents of their own making.

Women in the Pacific are accountable and responsible to complex, culturally distinct political-economic constellations of power. This means that they are continually negotiating power relations, all of which are gendered. Careful attention must be paid to the precise and diverse activities, interactions and economic participation of women market vendors to ensure that the planned improvements for marketplaces in cities like Honiara, Suva, Port Vila and Port Moresby do not redefine women market vendors as lesser political subjects. New buildings, for example, but no real change in the status quo of male-dominated market management and vendors associations, will not enable empowerment of the majority of women vendors. The individual as well as the collective political empowerment of women must be central and foundational to these projects.

Market places and market cultures in the Pacific

Marketplaces in the western and central Pacific have a long history and now exist in many forms (see e.g. Anderson, 2008; Epstein, 1961, 1982; Jackson, 1976; Pollard, 1996; Wang, 2014). The most humble markets include many that have experienced significant neglect, decline, or wanton abuse and destruction over the past three to four decades. They consist of women sitting long hours, exposed to the elements in a dedicated and demarcated, but otherwise barren space. Some markets are privately owned, often after being taken over by self-proclaimed landowners. Some appear quite informal, while others are opportunistically hosted on the grounds of

hospitals, schools and churches, or in the car parks of large supermarkets. The colonial remnants of early marketplaces – typically rectangular cement blocks with a tin roof – remain in evidence all over the region, some with their roots in the pre-colonial histories of places where villages would convene to barter and trade.

The most common market management governance model is one where local-level governments are responsible for employing a manager and support staff, making the by-laws and rules and collecting revenue, as well as carrying out cleaning and maintenance of facilities and amenities, and waste management. To this day, they are likely to operate with by-laws written during the colonial era, circa 1960s, rarely reviewed or updated, poorly publicised, and arbitrarily administered. By-laws routinely specify opening and closing hours, space allocation, fee determination and collection methods. They are translated into rules for basic hygiene, sanitation and civility between management, workers and vendors, and between different vendors, and vendors and customers. The revenue collected is presumed to reach local government accounts, and in the large city and town markets, it constitutes a significant, if not the largest, part of local government income. In some cases, it is the only revenue source for local government besides grants allocated by national government.

Some of the markets are large and impressive institutions in central locations in towns and cities. From the 1970s, established municipalities invested in developing built marketplaces, sometimes with the support of donors. In a few cases, this was to meet the demands of women vendors (e.g. in Lautoka, Fiji) or of the few women political leaders (e.g. in Port Vila and in districts in Shefa Province in Vanuatu). In spite of their vast size and usually very central location in towns and cities, markets have existed in another political and economic space – a marginalised place – based on gender blindness regarding their economic importance. This marginalisation is linked to the dominance of women as marketplace vendors and has led to general neglect. Negative, gender-discriminatory norms have emerged in this space of marginalisation and disregard, and have become entrenched over time: poor standards of occupational health and

safety, inadequate facilities and services for hygiene and sanitation (especially in terms of the needs of mothers and children), and limited guarantees of safety, security and law enforcement. Even when perceived by the general public and potential patrons as unhygienic, markets retain their predominance as a site of vital fresh food trade, a vibrant connection point with indigenous events, economies, customs and a communication channel between rural and urban populations.

Markets remain important centres of economic and social exchange. Poor women rely on them as a source of livelihood, no matter how limited or fraught. Marketplaces are also central to Pacific economies and food supply chains, and most urban centres cannot function without them. Contrary to the predictions of the 1970s, and partly due to the neglect and underdevelopment of rural infrastructure and service delivery, the volume of domestic food production in the Pacific has increased and marketplaces have become a central distribution point for this food production (Benediktsson, 2002; Bourke, 2005). Marketplaces in main urban areas, along major roads and near ports have become increasingly important. These markets provide critical livelihood opportunities for women market vendors, often their only entry into the cash economy, as well as providing city dwellers with affordable nutritious food. Fresh produce is also more readily available to local small- and medium-sized businesses, although supply chains that bypass the marketplace are becoming increasingly evident with an increasing number of international large-scale supermarkets entering the supply and distribution chain. Due to their volume, low costs and proximity, however, marketplaces remain an important source of high-value, affordable fresh food and nutrition. This is especially important in the face of rising non-communicable diseases, micronutrient deficiency and high rates of anaemia in urban contexts. Indeed, creative opening up of rules to permit local mini restaurants in marketplaces to supply cooked foods and snacks could offer Pacific cities an alternative to low-cost, low-nutrition imported snacks and fast food, while providing ample supplies for the burgeoning of restaurants to cater for the cities' elites.

Marketplaces as the site of merging gendered practices in development

Marketplaces have recently been identified as important sites of development practice. Scholarly interest in marketplaces in developing countries dates back to long-standing debates on the role of the informal economy in the transition to modern economies (Lewis, 1954). Three seminal research papers in the early 1970s clearly established the need to closely examine the 'informal sector' (Boserup, 1970; International Labour Office, 1972; Hart, 1973) because the informal sector included profitable and efficient enterprises as well as marginal economic activities (International Labour Office, 1972). Chen (2012) provides a useful review of the historical interest in the nature and role of the informal economy, highlighting that women have long been recognised as constituting a high proportion of workers in the informal sector, but concludes that 'the informal economy as a whole is more heterogeneous and complex than the sum of these perspectives would suggest' (Chen, 2012: 2).

There are a number of reasons for the recent resurgence of interest in the informal sector and specifically marketplaces (see Sirleaf Market Women's Fund, 2014). Some reasons relate to the unpredicted persistence, heterogeneity and complexity of the 'informal sector', and marketplaces specifically. The tenacity with which people remain committed to marketplaces despite their many apparent chaotic and unsafe conditions, especially for women and for traders, challenges mainstream notions that link the transition of people from the informal to the formal sector to increasing national growth (Chen, 2012). Another reason relates to the phenomenon of women, and their empowerment, being reinvented as essential to 'smart economics' (see e.g. World Bank, 2006). Such reasoning also led to a focus on marketplaces as they are filled with women, have been vibrant for many decades, and are strategic sites to address a range of development issues related to poverty, food security, 'market access' and growth. Yet within these new rationalisations for turning to local markets, little attention is given to the gendered power relations that underpin the daily marketplace dynamics, opportunities and risks. We argue, that this is because women and

girl vendors are predominantly perceived as 'domestic' producers, vendors and buyers, and not as political subjects and dynamic and opportunistic entrepreneurs (see Khanna *et al.*, 2013).

In some regions, women market vendors have long been the source globally of development, anthropological and economic analysis, and particularly in Ghana because of the impact of that country's dramatic shift to an export-oriented economy from the late 1980s onwards (see e.g. Konadu-Agyemang, 2000; Clark, 2010; Britwum, 2013). Early comparisons between marketplaces in Melanesia and Africa (Keil, 1977), however, hold less weight, given the globalising tendencies affecting consumption and the growing impoverishment among the urban and peri-urban poor (see e.g. Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004). In other developing countries, such as Liberia, there is a renewed importance under the political leadership of women given to the role of marketplaces in urban food supplies and in supporting rural incomes so donors continue to contribute to new or improved market building (Subah-Belleh Associates, 2007; Sirleaf Market Women's Fund, 2014). In the western Pacific, however, few donors or local governments have considered the need for new, more gender-responsive models and systems of market governance as critical investments. The governance of most markets continues to be entrenched in gender-blind, anachronistic colonial by-laws and management systems dominated by men. Reform is long overdue. Reproducing these outdated management systems in new market buildings obstructs substantive qualitative social, political or economic gains for the majority of women vendors.

In Santo, Vanuatu, representatives of vendors from around the island, local government staff and NGOs have formed a committee that has negotiated with the Provincial Council for an increased role in market governance, including reforming the financial system to enable independent accounting of market revenue and advocacy for its reinvestment in the market. In the new province of Jiwaka, in the highlands region of PNG, markets in three district centres have deteriorated because old market buildings are too small or uninhabitable. The sites now exist as barren plots, fully appropriated by

landowner families, whose male members demand daily fees from women vendors who submit because they have no other income-generating place or options. These market landlords earn NZD400–1400 per day per market with no accountability.

In 2013, a local women's rights NGO in the Highlands of PNG, Voice for Change, began lobbying for new market models that could generate revenues sufficient for progressive improvement and expansion, including renting spaces to local government, civil society and independent providers of key development services. This model insists that women play management and decision-making roles and encourages organisation and participation by all vendors – full time, part time and seasonal; wholesalers, retailers, producer-sellers; and diverse entrepreneurs and service providers. The model emphasises that their co-location in one social-economic hub could add value in multiple ways that support and complement fresh food sales and diversity of trade. It equally prioritises transparency and reinvestment of profits, and recognises the increasing differentiation among vendors and the need to accommodate and harmonise their different needs and contributions.

Marketplaces and stories of change

Since the mid-1980s, there have been several inspirational experiences of research involving activists, vendors and women's leaders in and about marketplaces in the Pacific. For example, one of us was engaged in such research in PNG markets in Angoram in 1988 and in Kundiawa in 1992, as well as an event/exchange at the Ba market bure in 2013. In the following section, we present two particular stories of change, one in Solomon Islands and one in Fiji.

Story of change 1: The Melanesian Market Learning Exchange

In mid-2012, three of the authors co-facilitated a unique event in Honiara, a cross-country Learning Exchange (the Melanesian Market Learning Exchange) of women leaders and activists and market vendors who have engaged in marketplace change and development. The 10 women and one man who participated were

from PNG, Vanuatu, Fiji and the Solomon Islands. We convened and shared to hear and learn from each other, and to document the nascent and ongoing efforts to change gendered power relationships in markets. This included consideration of the recent appointment by the Town Council of a female manager of the Honiara central market, an unprecedented recognition and opportunity in Solomon Islands. Two women market managers were appointed in municipal markets in Vanuatu, one in Vila and one in Santo. Both were promoted from their previous roles, one as a cleaner and the other as a 'revenue collector'. Women are also managing some of Fiji's smaller markets and some of the newly built markets in PNG (in Wewak, Kokopo and Buka).

The new market manager in Honiara was intentionally hired as a well-known woman of integrity and a church leader, who had played a significant role during the country's armed tensions and post-conflict reconciliation process in the Solomon Islands (Pollard, 2000; Kabutaulaka, 2001; Amnesty International, 2004). She had an admirable track record of working with men and women in contexts of conflict, violence and corruption, although she did not have a management background, or a background of working with a strong gender perspective and analysis. In Solomon Islands and PNG, only a few women have been recruited as market managers, principally to stop the multi-level leakage of revenues.

The Melanesian Market Learning Exchange was hosted under the auspices of UN Women, (one of us was then heading the UN Women's Pacific Office) and was deliberately scheduled during the 11th Festival of Pacific Arts in 2012, a regional cultural event held every four years to 'ensure and promote Pacific identity/culture in the future' (Stevenson, 2012: 6). Firmly focused on indigenous peoples of the Pacific, over time the Festival has celebrated arts and culture from the past, as well as contemporary cultural expression. Holding the Learning Exchange during the Festival of Pacific Arts was an opportunity and deliberate choice to promote marketplaces as important cultural, economic and social institutions and hubs with strong links to traditional economy and society, as well as an important place to trade local food crops, local forest, marine and river

delicacies, and indigenous art and craft. Markets are one of the few places where wild harvested and traditionally prepared foods are available to urban communities, and market vendors are essential actors in safeguarding and promoting Pacific food culture. The timing of the Learning Exchange event was also designed to give women market vendors a rare opportunity to participate in an important regional event. Far too often, women vendors miss out on mainstream social and cultural events, even when they take place in and around the market or the surrounding town because they cannot afford to leave their contested spaces and competitive sales opportunities, simply because every sale counts.

The conference room of the Honiara Central Market manager's office was our meeting-cum-training space for the Market Learning exchange. This venue gave the extremely busy new market manager, her 'helpers' and some women vendors opportunities to input and participate, when time allowed. Participants were invited from the Highlands Region of PNG, from Vanuatu's innovative roadside (community-based) markets and women-led district markets, and women leaders from large and smaller vendors associations in Fiji's two biggest cities – Lautoka and Suva. These women all had rich and varied work experience as teachers, vocational trainers, agriculturalists, church leaders, book-keepers, seasonal agricultural workers in Australia, clerks with local government and as human rights defenders in conflict-affected communities. Most also had direct experience working as market vendors.

The Learning Exchange convened a symposium as a platform for market vendors, advocates and an official to speak publicly about their market experiences from diverse perspectives. Women vendors shared triumphant stories of mobilising women to form market vendors' associations, of demanding gender responsiveness and accountability from local officials, and of making the case for progressive market models in newly formed municipalities. Women also shared stories of struggle, exploitation, indignity and abuse, common across countries and settings. As facilitators, we guided and connected the testimony, drawing conclusions about the structural and systemic constraints women face in markets. Testimonies and

reflections highlighted cases like that of a few women councillors transforming Vanuatu's capital and remote district markets into thriving markets-cum-social centres, hosting innovation and social and economic exchange. Here, town clerks, provincial administrators and local policemen had recognised that women needed to be in the lead and working with local government to effect lasting change in market governance. As this Learning Exchange proceeded, vendors in Honiara market were encouraged and supported to develop and diversify their indigenous and introduced fresh and processed food products for sale. A photo exhibition of scenes from markets around the Pacific was launched to the wider audience of the Festival of Pacific Arts. A young and gender-sensitive performance artist from PNG accompanied us, developed friendships with market vendors and, with their permission, painted their portraits which hung proudly as banners throughout the Festival.

The Learning Experience in Honiara affirmed the central role of women in addressing the immense challenge of providing safe, well-managed, welcoming markets for the diverse range and growing number of people currently living in urban spaces in the Pacific (Lacey, 2011). The next story shows how, in different locations and contexts, women market vendors continue to demonstrate that the radical empowerment of women can transform many lives.

Story of change 2: The leadership and influence of Fiji's women market vendors

In Lautoka, the second largest city of Fiji, there is a huge market with the capacity to generate very substantial revenues to the City Council through vendor's taxes, vendor and customer fines, and ablation and parking fees. Behind this vast institution, is an apparently unassuming vendor, Makareta Rika, now in her 70s, who has been an activist, advocate, negotiator and union leader for vendors since the early 1970s. She remains dedicated to her humble stall, selling traditional mats and *tabua* (traditional whale's tooth currency), both very important to the traditional custom, ritual and transactions among Fijians. Makareta played a critical role in the formation of a vendors' union following the first collective mobilisation and demand for proper

buildings and shelter, followed by a heroic and strategically led strike in 1980. For 40 days and 40 nights, vendors stayed out of the market, and picketed the local government to counter a 500% increase in vendors' daily stall fees which were planned once the newly built market was opened. Makareta has been voted back into leadership of the union over many decades, and locally her leadership is legendary. From her stall, she keeps a watchful eye on daily market life, and from her home she performs an informal hotline service for overnight vendors who are harassed by drunkards or washed out by heavy rains. She keeps management, still mostly men, accountable and responsive. She petitioned, for example, for women to be fee collectors, and won; she arranged for a local child-minding service to be established adjacent to the market; and she is financial adviser, counsellor and negotiator for greater safety and security around the market.

Recent victories on behalf of vendors include the banning of kava drinking in and around the Lautoka market, especially after hours, and insistence on police foot patrols to ensure safety for rural women vendors who have to sleep in the open air, in their hundreds around the market at night, from Wednesday through to Saturday afternoon. Indeed, by working with and lobbying and challenging UN Women project planners, and after insisting on conducting many foot patrols of her own, Makareta has facilitated financing of new and safe sleeping quarters for rural vendors. Makareta demonstrated strategic leadership, empowerment, collective action and victory for previously voiceless and exploited vendors.

Mili, a Suva flower vendor, met Makareta through a series of scoping and planning exchanges among women vendor leaders and local governments, first in Fiji, and then at the Learning Exchange in Honiara in 2012. Mili is 20 years younger than Makareta, and a survivor of two violent marriages – men who refused her right to work as a trained vocational centre teacher – which finally left her destitute and a single mother. After a stint working in Australia and overstaying her visa, she ended up in a detention centre, where she was noticed and asked to teach English to African asylum seekers. Returning to Suva, she turned to cut flower vending in a corner of Suva market as

her only option to make a living. There she experienced fierce marketplace competition, among the older, established vendors and the newcomers. Mili began spending nights at the market, alongside the hundreds of others doing it tough, sleeping out in the open. Luxury was sleeping in a cardboard lined wheelbarrow (rented from the 'barrow boys'), instead of on the cold ground. Flower vendors were treated as though they did not exist, labelled 'not real or legitimate vendors,' and therefore vulnerable to many forms of extortion, in the form of inflated, or double fees, while still being told to 'find their own security' and to 'clean-up their own mess'. Mili started 'foot-patrolling' the markets to talk to other vendors who slept overnight, investigating the exclusionary treatment and inadequate amenities for rural vendors. They are regularly denied a guarantee to trading space and made to pay excessively and 'illegally' for access to and use of toilets, washbasins and mirrors, and showers. Further, these women vendors are told they are not real vendors, and therefore refused membership of the vendors' union, which has fallen under the control of a small and relatively wealthy elite with a monopolistic grip on consolidated blocks of stalls inside the markets.

Mili is now making demands on the local government, monitoring and reporting on the performance of the market manager and his staff, challenging the exclusion of rural vendors from the vendors' union, and talking to the media. Mili felt increasingly driven to investigate and to speak out. She has exposed many problems, including the limitations of recent projects to provide overnight shelter for rural vendors and a small sunshade for flower vendors. She has formed a cut flower association and is strengthening the collective voice of her peers. She also voluntarily oversees the newly built rural vendors' overnight accommodation and continues to pressure market management and local government to do something about the distant, unsafe and dilapidated toilet block and the fees squeezed out of transiting vendors who are expected to pay separate fees to wash their hands, comb their hair, change baby nappies and more. Increasingly, she spreads the message of vendors' rights and market management corruption; challenge and change is in the air.

From 2010 to 2012, both Makareta and Mili enjoyed the friendship of one of the authors, who was Head of UN Women's Pacific Office at the time, and her programme staff as they consulted and planned the current market improvement project. Many cold and wet late nights were spent at the market, drinking coffee, recording testimonies, taking photos and making a documentary film. Makareta and Mili brought many women vendors' voices into the analysis, and this underpins the rationale and justification for radical change in the way business is conducted in two of Fiji's largest and busiest markets. Makareta's long journey to organise and mobilise her vendors' union, to protest, strike and advocate, has been documented and shared. Mili is speaking to many people involved in marketplace improvements and has empowered herself and her peers to challenge the way market management uses the label of 'illegal trade' to justify marginalisation and mistreatment of Suva's flower vendors.

Beyond the new donor-supported buildings, change driven by such women, with the solidarity of donor partners, other women's rights organisations and feminist individuals, is critical to urgently needed structural and operational change. Market projects based on funding construction of new market buildings, and introducing electronic cards to minimise risks associated with vendors or managers carrying cash are not enough. The formation of democratic vendors' unions or associations, routine and institutionalised dialogue and negotiation between vendors and local government/market management are essential if the future for vendors is to be better, more just and more socially, politically and economically empowering.

Conclusion

Everybody wants to improve; indeed, in the case of marketplace development in the Pacific, there is a clear shared will to improve (Murray Li, 2007). In this paper, we are not dismissing the rationale and intended outcomes of different development agencies to improve markets. Instead, we look at how the changes to marketplaces have come about and what has been learnt from the past. It is clear that the gender lens employed in the design, implementation and monitoring of change is not radical enough

to address gender equality and facilitate women's empowerment. We suggest that a radical empowerment of women approach is needed to ensure that marketplace development projects contribute to transformative shifts in current thinking: first, by recognising that women market vendors are informed politically astute stakeholders or 'citizens' of markets, and second, by recognising that women market vendors endure wider forms of disempowerment while simultaneously contributing significantly to household, community and regional livelihoods. In practice, this would, for example, lead to participatory research, monitoring and evaluation of projects, and the creation and implementation of policies governing marketplaces which actively partners with organised vendors.

Our approach challenges development researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to explicitly engage in changing structures and practices that lead to inequality and harm, and not just on the physical structures of market buildings and related infrastructure. We have argued that new projects for marketplaces that fail to prioritise the elimination of gender inequality run the risk of reframing changes as technical and infrastructural, and not addressing the gendered political and economic causes of poor market management and oppressive conditions for women vendors. When the economic contribution of marketplaces is not counted, it remains invisible and neglected, the exclusion and exploitation of women flourishes, and important livelihood and local economic opportunities are missed. This paper demonstrates how women can be, and have been empowered to engage in the development of progressive new marketplace models and practices in the face of long-standing patterns of exploitation, abuse and neglect. Marketplaces provide livelihoods for the most marginalised women and men, engender new civic norms and ethics, and have the potential to be flourishing hubs of new market-based entrepreneurship, creativity and local trade relationships, partnerships and cultures. But this will only be possible when women market vendors are able to take the lead. This should not be such a radical notion, but to some, it is (Kabeer *et al.*, 2013).

This paper has made use of a cooperative, hybrid research collaboration. The innovations

required of us each individually as researchers, as feminists, as practitioners and as activists in writing this paper mirror to some extent the innovation we believe is offered by the framework we advocate. Both require a commitment to partnership that emphasises mutual learning, recognition of lived experience and empowerment. Both require flexibility. It is our aim to continue to advocate the framework for researching, making policy for and working in practice in marketplaces. This paper has served to strengthen our commitment to ensure greater recognition and empowerment of women market vendors, and we feel this framework contributes to this.

Women are working in markets in the Pacific and their perseverance is reshaping and remaking their spaces. Most are doing this from personal situations of extreme hardship, and they must overcome entrenched gendered cultural, institutional and practical barriers to establish and sustain their daily and weekly trading cycles and incomes, on which families and communities depend. The radical empowerment of women offers much for many. This paper has explored the complex array of motives and effects of the desire to transform or improve marketplaces in the Pacific, and has cautioned against simplistic technical or infrastructural solutions or dismissals of the importance of marketplaces. Instead, it calls for a radical, transformative approach that will empower women vendors and ensure social justice, sustained livelihoods, and safe and vibrant local economic hubs.

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